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NOVEL

Reincarnated as a **SWORD**

WRITTEN BY
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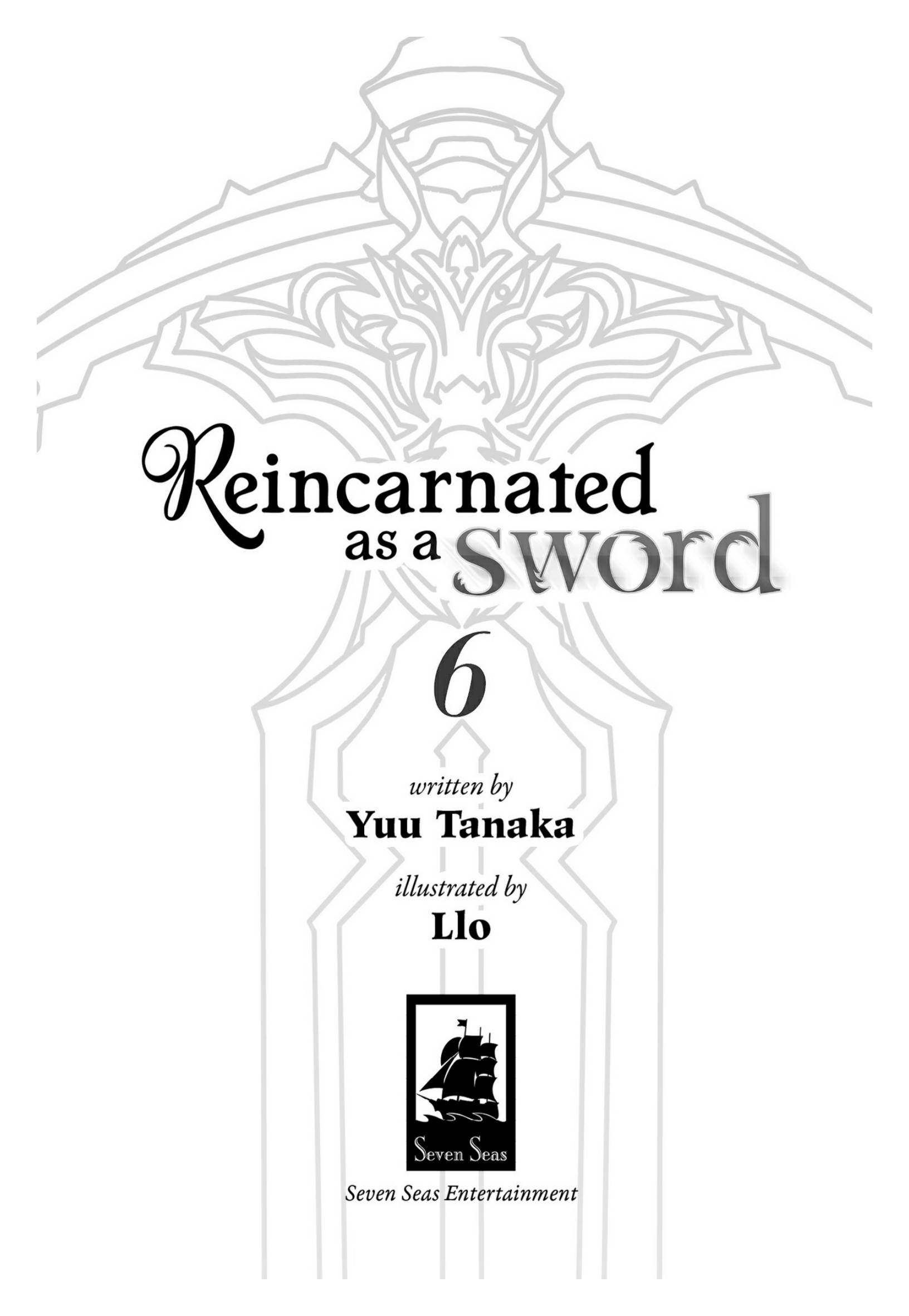
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Reincarnated
as a sword 6







Reincarnated as a **Sword**

6

written by

Yuu Tanaka

illustrated by

Llo



Seven Seas Entertainment

REINCARNATED AS A SWORD VOL. 6

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Illustrations by Llo

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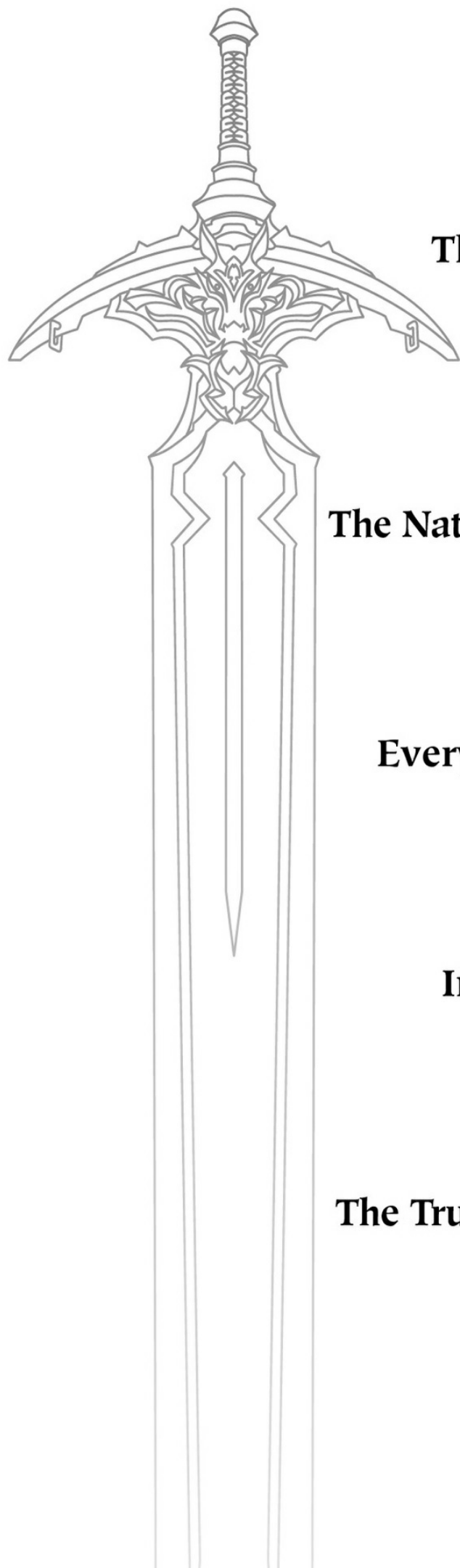
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Fran's True Calling

Chapter 1:

The Joys and Sorrows of the Qualifiers *WELL, let's get going.*

"Hm."

"Woof!"

After a full breakfast and a thorough look at her equipment, Fran left the inn. She'd wasted no time in using her newly maxed-out Blacksmith skill, and I was in top condition. She'd even thrown out the old rag she used before and bought a dedicated polishing cloth made from top-class monster materials. I really felt the difference, and her love for me truly made my morning.

"Hm hmm."

You're in a good mood.

"Of course! I can't wait!" Fran smiled, clearly looking forward to today's battles.

You're so excited for these fights, it almost scares me. You still don't know who you're going up against.

"That's why it's exciting."

Yeah, I guess you're right.

"Hm!"

Fran's blood knight tendencies were showing—she wasn't afraid of the unknown.

Guess I'm too late...

"Hm?"

Nothing. I wonder who you'll fight first.

Fran was heading to the battle arena for her first preliminary. The tournament itself started yesterday, and would be held over fourteen days. The first round of preliminaries happened over the first two days, with the second round following on the third and fourth. There were over a thousand entrants, and the organizers held five-man matches to get through the eliminations as quickly as

possible.

The multitudes of adventurers in Ulmutt made it a spawning ground for arenas and training centers. With these facilities, the two hundred first-round matches wouldn't take too long.

These matches were not open to the public. They were too much of a mixed bag. Matches between fellow beginners made for a dull fight, while a veteran would squash his competition in an instant. Spectators could only watch from the second round on, which would be held in larger venues.

The preliminaries whittled down the field to fifty. Adding the fourteen seeded fighters, the tournament would begin with sixty-four combatants.

It was incredibly bloody by Earth standards. Killing someone in the heat of battle was not a crime, and all the combatants signed a waiver acknowledging the risks. This world did have Healing Mages and potions which allowed someone to be brought back from the brink of death, but these were prohibited in the first round of preliminaries. The rule discouraged any participants who weren't ready to put their lives on the line, and prevented the guild from bankrupting itself by handing out healing potions to everyone who participated.

Getting nervous, Fran?

"Nope."

She didn't even know why she would be. The girl had nerves of steel. But then, we were more than prepared. We were the strongest we'd ever been, and I knew Fran felt the same way.

I'll hang back to begin with, but I'm helping out if you're up against someone tough. That okay?

"I'd like to see how much stronger we are."

Our first match was at the Adventurers' Guild's training grounds, located right next to the guildhouse. We couldn't miss it, and we had time before the match, so we took our time getting there.

I went over the rules again to pass the time. They weren't complicated—the matches tended to be too violent for subtle strokes. The only thing Fran had to

remember was the prohibition on healing potions. Combatants were allowed to use all the spells at their disposal. There was a ban on Fiend Magic, but that was a given. Using it was paramount to outing yourself as mankind's universal enemy.

Summoning was allowed as long as the creatures weren't humanoid. However, you couldn't have them present from the start of the match. That meant we could bring Jet in, provided he stayed in the shadows until the match began. He was technically our familiar, but the rule only stated "summons and the like."

Jet, you're our ace in the hole.

Woof!

Our direwolf was hiding in the shadows and raring to go, ready to pounce on our mark. There were no restrictions on enchanted equipment or manatech—the matches were a no-holds-barred exhibition of an adventurer's full arsenal. Anyone who was knocked out of the ring was disqualified. Combatants could also forfeit by admitting defeat.

You got all that?

"Hm. Crystal clear."

Are you sure?

"Hm."

Fran nodded, though her eyes were locked on the food stalls in the distance. The long wait was making her as restless as a girl with her first crush. Still, she wouldn't spoil her stomach by eating right before a match. She wiped the drool from her lips and resisted the food stall's gravitational pull.

You can eat as much as you want after your fight. Just hang in there.

"Hm."

Fran stole a final glance at the stalls. There were a lot more of them now the tournament had begun, and each one looked more delicious than the last. We hurried to the guild, but Fran stopped just in front of it.

What is it, Fran? Did she spot something she simply had to try?

“Over there.” Fran pointed to a stall. The name of the shop seemed familiar.

Is that...the Dragonhead?

The Dragonhead was a restaurant which had competed in Bulbola’s cooking contest. Now it had set up shop in front of the guildhouse.

“I’ll go and see.”

Sure.

Fran ducked into the stall. She recognized the blonde dandy who was selling soup. Phelms, the former A-Rank adventurer turned restaurateur, was looking classy as always.

“Is that the proprietress of the Black Tail I see before me?” Phelms recognized Fran and approached us. His saunter added to the refinement of his age. I imagined he must have a lot of younger fans.

“It’s been a while,” said Fran.

“It really has. Will you be taking part in the tournament?”

“Hm.”

“Well then, the best of luck to you. Though I imagine you wouldn’t need it.”

Fran asked whether Phelms was participating, and he told us that he was. More than that, he was a seed now, owing to the many victories he had racked up when he was younger. I didn’t expect anything less from the former A-Rank.

He’ll make for one hell of a tough fight.

People didn’t call him “Dragon Killer” for nothing. He killed them just to turn them into ingredients. What made Phelms even more terrifying was that he didn’t *look* that strong, though he had to be, considering his former rank. If his appearance could be that deceptive, then he was definitely still in good shape.

“I’m getting old, but I made an exception this year. A friend of mine asked me to participate, you see. I couldn’t refuse, since he’s been helping me out all these years.”

He would only fight after the qualifiers. In the meantime, Phelms was out promoting his restaurant. He told us that reconstruction efforts were already

underway in Bulbola, and that the former Marquis Christon had donated his assets to the cause. The Adventurers' Guild played a big part in helping out, too.

Amanda renovated the Bulbolan orphanage while Io took care of its children. Io was still making delicious Garbage Soup out of meager ingredients, and I imagined that it tasted even better now that she had basic cooking utensils and more funds to buy ingredients.

And then there was the great curry boom. Many stores imitating the Black Tail had cropped up, usually with names starting with "Black" or ending in "Tail." They all followed the basic curry recipe I sold to the Lucille Trading Association, adding their own interpretive twist. I could barely believe it; it seemed so unreal.

Fran was happily listening to the old man, but it was time for us to go. I would hate for us to be late.

Fran.

"Hm. I have to get going."

"Oh, sorry for holding you up."

"That's okay. It was nice talking to you."

"I hope I'll see you on the main stage."

"Hm. Sure."

"Now there's a smile I like to see." Phelms' grin had all the ferocity of Fran's battle-hungry smile.

"I'm going to win," she said.

"Will you now? I must be getting on if your optimism is enough to impress me." He smiled warmly, as if she was his own granddaughter. His lack of condescension betrayed a genuine admiration.

"Don't you want to win, Phelms?"

"Ha ha ha! That will be difficult, considering my age. I'll try to make the semifinals. But I do hope you can take the crown, Fran."

"Hm! You bet!"

Phelms' words of encouragement motivated her. I just hoped she didn't blow all her energy on the qualifiers.

That building there, Fran.

"Really? Here?"

We made our way to a building next to the guildhall. It was a lot smaller than expected, but that made sense since the initial qualifiers weren't open to the public. Hardy-looking adventurers entered one at a time, each looking ready to kill.

You're supposed to report at the entrance.

"Hm."

Fran casually walked to the reception.

"Oh, I'm sorry, little girl. You can't watch the first round of the qualifiers. You can come back again tomorrow, though," said the young man who manned the desk.

Even with me on her back, he didn't take her to be a combatant. He thought she wanted to watch.

I thought the guild had announced Fran's rank promotion, but then, this man didn't have the adventuring look about him. He was probably a lackey of the local aristocracy. He was shocked when she told him she was a combatant. Even so, he knew she wasn't joking, and frantically reached for the name list.

"Oh? Wh-what's your name?"

"Fran."

"Uh...! Whoa! R-really? You're participating?"

"Hm." Fran nodded. The attendant became even more worried.

"No offense, but would you consider backing out? It's not too late. The first qualifiers are very dangerous. No Healing Mages, you know."

The man had Fran's best interest at heart, but it really wasn't his place to say. Since his worry was genuine, she wasn't offended. "I'll be fine."

"People die every year. I'm serious."

“Thanks. I’ll be going now.”

“Just throw in the towel if you get cold feet! You’ll bleed out if they get you, and then it’ll be too late!”

The receptionist shouted his concern after Fran as she walked away. Despite our difficulties at the entrance, the rest of the registration process went smoothly. The contest official was an old man and seemingly a seasoned adventurer himself. He could tell how strong Fran was. In fact, he turned to look at the rest of the contestants with a sort of pity.

“Heh heh. How’d this kid wander in here?”

“I guess this makes it a four-way fight.”

“Is this some kind of joke? This tournament’s my chance to get scouted by the army! I can’t fight a little girl!”

Two mercenaries and two adventurers were already waiting in the ring. They all underestimated Fran, with one exception. I identified the stern adventurer who’d kept his eyes trained on her. He was strong. D-Rank, probably. He had probably heard about Fran’s recent promotion.

“We shall begin.” The old contest official walked unceremoniously into the arena, now in the capacity of referee. He was treating this a lot more casually than I expected. Then again, it was only the qualifiers.

The combatants readied their weapons and took their positions, except for one young greenhorn who raised his voice in complaint.

“I know the tournament’s open to everyone, but you can’t expect me to hurt a child! I came here to make a name for myself! Beating her would only soil my reputation!”

“Even so, I do not have the authority to make her forfeit.”

“Go home, kid!” the greenhorn shouted. “This isn’t a playground!”

The veteran adventurer turned to him. “First day in Ulmutt?”

“I got here yesterday, what of it?”

“That explains it...” The veteran sighed at the greenhorn’s ignorance. He

seemed to sympathize, but also to understand it would be a waste of time and effort to try change his mind. “It is time. We shall begin.”

“You can’t be serious...!”

“Look bud, if you don’t think you can beat this kid, then why don’t *you* drop out?”

“Yeah, just spare us your whining!”

“What?!”

The two mercenaries were losing their patience.

Teacher, can’t I just go at him now?

No. They’ll disqualify you.

Fran was getting irritated. Fortunately, the old referee chose to ignore the greenhorn’s pleas and began counting down.

“We shall begin. Five, four, three...”

“You can’t just—”

“Two, one. Begin!”

The match commenced despite the greenhorn’s complaints. The mercenaries made the first move.

“Heh heh. First things first...”

“Take down the strongest of the lot!”

They weren’t much, but they had experience in the arena and were good enough to know an opportunity when they saw it. Before we knew it, they’d teamed up and were attacking in unison. Mercenaries were known for their arsenal of weapons and were usually weak on their own. However, their fluid teamwork showed that their strength lay in numbers. As a unit, they might be more coordinated than an average adventuring party.

The greenhorn brandished a dull-looking blade to defend himself. “Cowards! So you mean to focus your attacks on me!”

Rest easy, buddy. Where did this kid get his confidence from? He might be out

to make a name for himself, but this was only the qualifiers!

“You’re going down!”

“Die!”

The greenhorn wasn’t their target, and neither was Fran. Instead, the mercenaries focused their efforts on the veteran adventurer. He was a big man, and his looming silence made him seem like the strongest of the bunch. I applauded the mercenaries’ strategy.

Unfortunately, the veteran was far too strong for both of them. “Hrmph!” He swung, knocking both mercenaries out of the ring.

“How?!”

“This guy’s a beast!”

We locked eyes with the greenhorn. The dense fool was still trying to get Fran to drop out, even though the match was underway.

“Look, I am the genius swordsman from the village of Collent. I’m E-Rank! You will not leave this battle unscathed, girl. Consider this your final warning!”

He must be something of a local prodigy in his village. I was impressed he’d survived long enough to make E-Rank. He wasn’t strong enough to survive a horde of goblins, and I wondered if pure luck had carried him this far. His condescension pushed Fran over the edge. She was mad now.

“I’m telling you—”

“Shut up.”

Whack!

Before he could finish, Fran planted her foot square in the middle of his abdomen. The kick sent him flying across the arena. He rolled to a stop at the edge, the shape of Fran’s boot imprinted on his leather armor.

“Urgh! Gaah...” The greenhorn squirmed in pain and held his belly. He wasn’t coughing up blood, so I took that as a sign that his internals weren’t damaged.

Good job on holding back, Fran!

Hm! I’m getting better at it!

Not so long ago, she'd nearly killed some men when she lost her temper outside the city gates. Now, she could control her strength better. All the time she'd spent training in the dungeon was finally paying off.

"Gurh..." The greenhorn squinted at Fran in disbelief. He must've flown a good ten meters. This was the first time he'd suffered such a devastating attack. He was overtaken by fear and confusion.

"I won't hold back if you still want to argue."

"Ugh..." The greenhorn wasn't so dense that he couldn't feel the pressure Fran was emanating, nor the intense pain he was in. He put aside his pride and meekly rolled out of the arena.

Why'd you hold back, though? You could've knocked him out in one hit.

He's dumb and loud, but he's not a bad person.

Fran wanted to let him know what he was dealing with, and give him the opportunity to back out. Her mercy broke the man's pride. Everyone saw he'd had ample time to dodge her blow.

"I knew this was coming..."

"Hm."

Fran and the veteran walked towards the center of the arena.

"I don't think I can beat you, but I'll sure as heck try!" the veteran shouted, lunging to attack.

"Hmph!"

Fran's counterblow immediately knocked him out. He was good, but he had awful luck fighting Fran in the first round. He crumpled to the ground, holding the spot where her left hand had struck him.

"Unfortunate..."

And that was how Fran passed the first qualifier.

"Why?!"

"Why indeed... Must I spell it out for you?"

“We have sworn an oath!”

“I understand. Your kind were working in the shadows long before we came to be.”

“Th-that’s right!”

“You fought in the frontlines, and did the dirty work when no one else would.”

“Indeed!”

“You would even sell out your comrades.”

“There is nothing we wouldn’t do!”

“Yes, indeed. That has been your oath so far.”

“You have yet to explain yourself!”

“The problem is...I’m not sure much remains of your oath today.”

“Wh-what are you insinuating?!”

“Did you think I wouldn’t find out?”

“...”

“Silence, is it? Very well. I shall give you one more chance to prove that your oath still has value.”

“What do you propose?”

“Bring me the patriarch’s head.”

“H-have you gone mad?!”

“I should ask you the same thing. What you have done amounts to treason. I have grounds to wipe you from history.”

“You—”

“I merely ask for your leader’s life as compensation for your crimes. Even that isn’t enough, really. I’m letting you off easy.”

“I would never!”

“Is that your final answer? Do you wish to be our enemy?”

“I-I...”

“I’ll give you time to think. You can even use that time to run. I only hope it’s enough.”

“You rabbit bastard...”

“That’s rich, coming from a Tailless.”

“How dare you?!”

The second round of qualifiers took place two days after the first, and were held in a more sizable arena. The one thousand combatants had been whittled down to two hundred and forty. Soon, only fifty would be left.

There were two venues with the contestants split into two groups, and spectators were allowed in. The setup was still a five-man battle royale, unlike the one-on-one matches of the finals. This format was quite popular, especially since the weakest participants had already been eliminated. In the second round, the fights truly took on a life of their own.

Betting was also allowed now. To prevent match fixing, combatants were unfortunately not allowed to make wagers. Getting caught meant instant disqualification. Back on Earth, shady groups always managed to get around this rule, but that wasn’t the case in Ulmutt. Dias had his eyes and ears in every nook and cranny. More to the point, the bookies were the most powerful syndicate in town—they held all the firepower and were very good at subterfuge, being a part of none other than the Adventurers’ Guild itself. The guild made short work of any other betting associations in town. A few might still be lurking about, but it was impossible for them to plot anything of significant scale.

Let’s go.

“Hm.”

We had plenty of time before Fran’s match, but we had to be there early. She would have to wait thirty minutes for her fight.

“That looks good.”

Are you sure you should be eating ribs so close to the fight?

“I’ll be fine.”

Fran showed no signs of anxiety. In fact, she was more herself than ever. This time, she had the chance to look around the food stalls. She sampled a bit of everything as she made her way to the arena.

This place is huge.

The venue resembled a Roman colosseum, albeit on a slightly smaller scale. I could hear the excitement even from a distance. Spectators cheered and roared, their voices echoing from the great circular arena.

Fran went around the back and made her way to the waiting room. This venue employed a proper receptionist, and they made no attempts to stop her. When she entered, everyone in the room stared in surprise, condescension, and distress. Fran took her seat and paid them no mind. She was used to this by now.

There were five waiting rooms, and the combatants for each round were spread out among them. The idea was to prevent fights before the bouts began.

“What’s a kid doing here?!”

But idiots were still aplenty. If this one had stopped to think about it, there was no way that an ordinary child could even survive the first round. The man pulled up a chair and sat next to Fran with a mocking look on his face.

“So what’d you give them to let you in here? Huh?”

“...”

“What? Can’t say?” the man jeered.

He could have been lashing out from nervousness. Either way, Fran wasn’t happy about it. But what could we do? We weren’t allowed to fight in the waiting rooms.

“Shut up.”

As I considered our options, Fran unleashed her Intimidate skill. A wave of pressure washed over the room, catching everyone inside it.

“Urk!”

“Eeek!”

“Guh!”

One combatant turned pale and fell off his seat. One let out a high-pitched shriek. One drew his weapon and fell into a battle stance. For a moment, everyone in the room panicked.

That was too much, Fran.

“Hm?”

One look at their terror was enough to tell she’d gone overboard—and they only suffered the aftershocks. Fran’s main target was sitting on the floor shivering, looking like he was about to pass out.

“Hm.”

“Eeek...!”

A mere glance made the man scurry away. He backed off until he hit a wall. After that, his only recourse was to curl up into a ball. Fran might have overdone it, but he had brought this on himself. In any case, silence returned to the waiting room, and I could only mentally apologize to everyone who got caught in Fran’s menacing onslaught. Fran bowed her head at the innocent parties and the situation was defused, but everyone was on guard after that. Fran’s menacing aura had made them aware of their weaknesses. The silence was so heavy that the cheering of the spectators seemed distant.

And Fran was still innocently going through her lunch! She even took the time to access her Pocket Dimension to get some juice.

Finally, a woman entered the room and broke the silence.

“What’s this? Is that the Swordceress I see?” she said casually.

“Hm? Lydia?”

“It’s been a while. I didn’t expect to find you here.”

Lydia was an adventurer we met in Bulbola—a cool, expressionless girl. She belonged to a party called the Crimson Maidens, who acted as our salesgirls during the cooking contest. It felt like we’d only said our goodbyes yesterday. I

wondered if the rest of her party was participating in the tournament, too.

“Where’s Judith and Maya?”

“They’re fighting, too. Maya’s at the other venue, but Judith should be in one of the waiting rooms here. I sure am glad to see you.”

“Why?”

“Means I won’t have to fight you.” Lydia sighed with relief. She had already seen what Fran was capable of. “I just want to get to the main event.”

“And not win?”

“Oh, no. I know my limits. Besides, how am I supposed to win with people like Colbert and Forlund around? I’m just here to build up my reputation—to remind people not to underestimate me just because I’m a girl.”

Not everyone was out to take first place. Some, like Lydia and the greenhorn from yesterday, just wanted to make a name for themselves. The publicity and sheer number of spectators would make that easy. Lydia’s dreams of fame aside, she had mentioned some familiar names.

“Colbert and Forlund are here, too?” Those two would make tough opponents.

“Yeah, and don’t smile like that. It’s a little off-putting.”

Fran grinned with genuine joy. Her blood knight tendencies kicked in at the thought of fighting senior adventurers.

“By the way, congratulations on your promotion. Can’t believe you’re a C-Rank already. You’re blazing your way up.”

“Thanks.”

“If we happen to get matched in the main event, please go easy on me. I don’t wanna get hurt.”

“Hm.”

“Promise me, okay? I’ll be super mad if you don’t hold back.”

Lydia’s frankness might be considered a kind of strength. She and Fran talked until it was finally time for our bout.

“I’ll be going now,” Fran said.

“Good luck. Not that you need it.”

“Thanks.”

Fran left Lydia and walked down a narrow hallway for a short distance. Eventually she came to a doorway, where the blinding lights of the arena flooded through.

Are you ready, Fran?

“Hm.” Fran nodded, looking straight ahead.

If you lose here, the Beast King won’t pick up your scent.

His Majesty would most likely be watching the main event. We suspected him of endorsing slavery through his Blue Cat lackeys. And he was strong; too strong for us. If Fran did well in this tournament, chances were good that he would notice us.

It’s not too late to drop out.

“I won’t.”

A chance encounter with the Beast King had shattered Fran’s will. She’d spent the rest of the day cowering in fear for what might have been the first time since we met. No...that might’ve been the first time in her *life* that she was overwhelmed like that. The encounter was unfortunately unforgettable.

The Beast King might make you his target. You know that, right?

“Hm!”

Even so, Fran had no intention of backing down. Maybe she would’ve made a different choice before she heard about Kiara, but as a fellow Black Cat, there was no way she could tuck her tail and run.

Well, if we end up crossing blades with the Beast King, let’s give him all we’ve got. If we end up with a bounty on our heads, we’ll use our Dimension Magic to get away. We’ll get on a boat and flee to another continent if we have to. You just leave that part to me.

“Thanks.”

For now, we had the second round to worry about. If we lost here, we wouldn't have to worry about the Beast King for a while.

That's all I have to say. Go get 'em!

"Hm!"

Fran stepped out into an arena many times larger than the one we fought in for the first round. The stone ring at the center of the gigantic colosseum was surrounded by stands that held over a thousand spectators. The place looked sold out, and the chorus of cheers was so loud it reverberated in my blade.

As always, Fran remained cool and composed. Three other combatants were already in the ring. We recognized one of their faces.

"Fran! Is that you?"

"Judith?" Judith was one of Lydia's friends and the leader of the Crimson Maidens.

"Just my luck. I'm done for!"

She dropped to her knees as soon as she saw us. I knew how she felt. Beating Fran would be very difficult for her. The other combatants looked equally worried. They all knew Fran's reputation.

"The Swordceress... She really is a little girl."

"Don't let that fool you. She's still C-Rank. Stronger than us."

Ewan and Yosh looked warily at Fran. They were definitely in the know. With the sheer number of adventurers participating, avoiding the limelight would be more difficult.

"You know," said Yuan. "I'm getting married at the end of the year."

"Really? Congrats! You better give your lady a good show today."

"You don't have to tell me twice!"

You shouldn't say those things before a fight, Yuan. Not that anything would give him a better chance of beating Fran.

At least no one was underestimating her yet—until the last combatant entered the ring with a sneer.

“Ha ha ha ha! What’s a kid doing at a fighting tournament?”

Fran squinted in anger. As if the mockery wasn’t bad enough, it had to come from a Blue Cat.

“So how’d you pass the first round? Did you pay ’em off? The judges have a thing for little kids?”

“I beat everyone else.”

“Hah! You think I’ll believe that a Black Cat can fight? Know your place, runt! Oh, I get it. You asked that old White Dog for a favor!” This guy was one of the members of Blue Pride. In fact, he was one of its supposed leaders. “You think I’m scared of you just because of that little stunt you pulled outside Aurel’s manor? You might have maxed out your Intimidate, but that’s all you have!”

Was he saying that he was much stronger in combat? Then again, his pride probably wouldn’t allow any sort of insult from a Black Cat.

“That disgusting monster interrupted us last time, but now you have nowhere to run. I’m going to smash your jaw, runt. I’ll knock you out and strip you for the whole town to see!” The Blue Cat spat at her, his face contorted and ugly. I felt like annihilating their entire mercenary band, but Fran was quiet. Wasn’t she going to say something?

As if reading my thoughts, Fran drew a breath. “Blue Pride...hmp. That’s cute.”

“What did you say?”

“You’re some no-name mercenary band that claims to be famous on a whole other continent. I did Aurel a favor by putting you in your place. Get away from me, Blue Cat. You smell like hot garbage.”

Was Fran pissed off? It’d been ages since her last diatribe.

“You little...!”

Before the Blue Cat could finish, a roar erupted from the crowd. There were giant screens set up at the corners of the arena—huge pieces of manatech that functioned as monitors to give the crowd a close-up view. They had caught every bit of that exchange. Which, of course, included the awful things the Blue

Cat had said. The crowd was booing. When Fran snapped her comeback, they rallied behind her.

The Blue Cat was furious. “That’s it! You’re finished!”

“Hmph.” Fran ignored him and turned away, infuriating the man even further. I could hear the crowd egging them on. With everyone properly warmed up, the fight commenced.

“Begin!”

As soon as the judge made the announcement, the Blue Cat leapt into action. His anger blinded him. Fran was his only target.

“Diiiiiiiie!”

He took a great leap upwards and brought his greatsword down on Fran’s head. The Blue Cat had pretty good form, for what it was worth, but he was out to kill her—which I thought was immature, considering Fran was only entertaining the crowd with her trash talk.

Surprisingly, the other three followed the Blue Cat’s lead and swarmed towards us. They had identified her as the strongest, and called a truce. Even Judith was set on using the others as meat shields. They weren’t about to back down just because Fran was obviously stronger than all of them combined. You had to admire their boldness.

Fran smiled and readied me, making the Blue Cat her first target.

“Raaaaargh!”

“Hmph.”

“Gaaah!”

I was still in my sheath, but she swung me with all her might. The blow connected with the man’s jaw and I felt it shatter from the impact. The Blue Cat’s body spun through the air. The crowd and the other combatants were shocked by the amount of force that erupted from her small body, but she wasn’t done yet. She used the momentum to launch a horizontal swing, knocking the Blue Cat towards the other combatants.

“Heavy Slash.”

“What?!”

“Urgh!”

“Hiyaaaah!”

The swordsman Yuan and the lancer Yosh took the main brunt of the hit. Even Judith was caught up behind her meat shields. They yelled as all three of them were knocked right out of the ring. Heavy Slash wasn't an advanced move, but with Fran's stats and skill level, it was a force to be reckoned with. Within seconds, three combatants were out of the game. But Fran was only getting started with the Blue Cat.

“Aieeee! Hurgf...!”

She struck the man's jaw a second time, forcing him into the ground. His body slammed into the stone floor, throwing pebbles across the arena.

“Huurk... gaaarh...”

The Blue Cat's face was trembling and misshapen. He coughed up blood. He was still conscious—not by his own strength, but because Fran was holding back.

“Aarfgh... I hiff urf! Wheeze...!”

“I don't understand a word you're saying.”

The man was unintelligible, his breathing ragged. You could say he was literally tongue-tied. “I hiff urf...”

“You're still not making sense.” Speaking with a broken jaw was very difficult.

“I hiff urf...!” The Blue Cat made an effort to kiss Fran's feet to show that he really had “hiffen urf.” She only looked at him with a cold, piercing stare.

“Are Blue Cats so stupid they don't know how to give up? I guess can't blame you.”

Fran had planned this from the beginning.

“If you can't give up because of your broken jaw,” she muttered. “I guess I'll strip you and lay you out for all of town to see.”

She turned his own words against him, aiming the full weight of her

murderous intent on the Blue Cat.

“Eeeerk! I’m horree! I’m horree! Heeease!”

He pleaded for mercy. She tossed a look at the referee as if to seek confirmation, and he hastily made his way into the ring to stop the match. Before he could make it, Fran took me in both her hands and pointed me at the Blue Cat.

“Time to end this.”

She swung me like a golf club.

“Gwaaaaaargh!”

She went for his jaw a third time, throwing him in an arc across the stadium. He flew for a good ten meters, maybe more, and landed outside the ring, his limbs twisted at an angle. The sight of it was enough to make anyone lose their appetite. Fran shouldered me again.

Even I thought that was a little much. I was worried about how the crowd would react to such a gruesome display of violence, but they roared with bloodthirsty appreciation.

“And we have a winner! The petite femme fatale sent the giant of giants flying in one fell swoop! Her cuteness might break your heart, but be careful that she doesn’t smash your face!”

Huh. I hadn’t noticed the commentator before. The voice carried through the venue out from manatech speakers.

“She wins the battle without once drawing her namesake! C-Rank Fran the Swordceress is your winner of the eleventh round of the west block qualifiers! She will proceed to the main event!”

The crowd erupted with applause. The tournament official came to guide Fran to another waiting room.

“Congratulations, Fran. You have made it to the finals.”

“Hm.”

The finals began the day after tomorrow. The roster would be announced

tomorrow morning, and there was an opening ceremony around midday. Fortunately, combatants were not obligated to attend. I didn't think Fran would be able to stand still if the nobles and officials started talking about her. She was never one for pomp and ceremony, and the entire procession would likely bore her to tears. With all the guests of honor participating, the Beast King was surely on the list. It would be best if we sat this one out.

In fact, even the official sounded as though he was steering us away from the procession. I suppose they didn't want bloodthirsty combatants around with all the VIPs in attendance. What's more, the roster would be delivered to each combatant's living quarters, discouraging them from attending in person and reducing the chance that fights would break out.

Aside from that, finalists were given priority in Ulmutt's smithies. The tournament provided Healing Mages and potions in case of grave injuries, but contestants were still required to have their armor inspected by a blacksmith, just in case.

Having heard the official's explanation, Fran left the room, only to run into Judith.

"I didn't stand a chance, Fran."

"Are you okay?"

"For the most part... Good thing you held back." She was disappointed that Fran knocked her out of the ring so quickly. Still, her anguish in defeat was tempered by the fact that Fran hadn't killed her in one hit.

Fran didn't know what to do in this situation. She fixed Judith with a troubled look.

"Oh, don't worry about me. Actually, I came here to wish you good luck. You better fight extra hard for my sake."

"Hm."

"And I'm putting all of my money on you! So please, win the first round at least!"

"Even if I end up fighting Lydia?"

“If you do, I trust her to your expert care!” Judith gave her a reassuring thumbs-up. We took Judith’s words of encouragement and greed and left the venue.

“I’ll do my best.”

Yeah. We’ve got Judith’s livelihood riding on us now.

It was day two of the second round. We received the tournament roster in the afternoon and spent some time looking through it. Sixty-four combatants made it to the finals, separated into blocks A to D. Each block hosted sixteen fighters. Fran was number eleven in A-Block. We looked up the other fighters she would be facing, but it didn’t help.

First up is...Zehmet?

“Never heard of him.”

He’s not a seed, so he probably made it to the finals because of his strength. We should hit the guild to see if we can dig up some info. Elza might know his fighting style.

Next, we turned our attention to the tournament seeds.

“Amanda and Forlund.”

Royce and Gaudartha are here, too!

Their names were on the four corners of the roster. These must’ve been the top seeds. The elite combatants would still have to go through the same fights as us, though.

The first seed of A-Block was A-1: Gaudartha. The second was A-16: Colbert. Colbert fought with his bare hands, but he was strong enough to send the giant Linford flying. We had yet to see Gaudartha in battle, but considering his frame and skill selection, he was bound to be some kind of power fighter. Both had the potential to kill you with one hit if you couldn’t block or dodge their attacks. We’d have to prepare a strategy before we stepped into the ring. Fortunately, we had their skills and stats as our guide. With Colbert right next to us, we would have to think of some martial arts countermeasures.

“Heh.”

Fran smirked, not looking the slightest bit worried. The prospect of going up against the Beast King's personal bodyguard didn't scare her. In fact, it only roused her fighting spirit. Still, she would still have to win two matches before she could even go up against Colbert. In any case, Zehmet was first on our list.

Who's after Zehmet... Wow, really?

"Cruise Rioulouse? Sounds familiar."

I didn't think you'd remember. He's the C-Rank we met back in Alessa. We explored the dungeon with his party and Amanda.

"Hm?" Despite my best efforts to jog her memory, Fran tilted her head.

Remember? The good-looking guy who looked like he'd been carrying the weight of his teammates all his life?

"Uhh, maybe? I'm not sure."

Perhaps seeing his face would remind her. I hoped so. If I saw Cruise, I would tell Fran and stop things from getting too awkward, though I wasn't even sure he'd make it past his first round. He was up against the fourth seed in the block.

Looks like he'll be fighting Radule. The self-proclaimed oldest adventurer in Ulmutt.

"He said he was C-Rank."

But he's as strong as a B-Rank, and he used to be a court mage, too.

No wonder he was seeded. Radule was stronger than his competition. With all due respect to Cruise, our time would be better spent preparing for a fight against Radule.

"Radule's going to win," Fran agreed. We needed to come up with a way to handle the old mage before our fight.

And if all goes well, we'll get matched up with A-16 after that. Colbert.

"Hm! Can't wait!"

Steelclaw had helped us a lot in Bulbola. He was more experienced than Fran, and he definitely had some tricks up his sleeve. We couldn't completely rely on the data we got from Identifying him, since his gear might have the Fake

Identity skill. All I remembered was that he had a strange Martial Arts skill called Dimitris Combat School. We'd have to do some more digging.

Beat Colbert and you'll finally be up against Gaudartha.

"Hm." Fran nodded, going quiet all of a sudden.

We'll need to figure out a way to beat him, too.

"We'll get him for sure!"

Yeah, that's the spirit!

Beating Gaudartha would be like taking home the gold. He was an A-Rank, after all—strong enough to single-handedly bring an army to its knees. His reputation made him one of the top favorites.

You're probably gonna get matched with another A-Rank if you beat him, though.

Amanda was a shoo-in for the semifinals, provided there were no upsets. If we beat her, we would face either Forlund or Royce in the final. I had a feeling that Amanda and Forlund were much stronger than Gaudartha—we had seen their power firsthand in Bulbola. Either way, my estimates couldn't be that far off.

"I'll beat them anyway."

We'll try, that's for sure.

Fran was still determined. And if she was in this to win, then I had to step my game up, too.

Hrmph!

"Teacher?"

Just psyching myself up. Let's win this, Fran!

"Hm!"

There were bound to be strong competitors other than the top seeds. We looked through the roster for familiar names and happened upon Phelms, who was in D-Block with Royce. I hoped the former A-Rank performed well. We should be in for quite a match.

Next was Elza, who was in B-Block with Amanda. It was bound to be an interesting fight, if a little hard to watch—a showdown between the two most terrifying women of the Adventurers' Guild.

Phillip Christon was one of the C-Block seeds. What was he doing here when Bulbola was still in the middle of reconstruction? Didn't his city need him or something? Well, he must have his reasons. He was a strong fighter, if the battle with Linford was any indication. We'd get to see him flex his skills against Forlund.

We found Charlotte in the roster, too—the caretaker of the Bulbolan orphanage. The girl was a Battle Dancer and specialized in malice purification and bewitching her foes. She was up against Elza. The poor thing didn't stand a chance, but we should still watch her match to support her. I couldn't find any of our other acquaintances in the roster, no matter how hard I tried.

“Lydia didn't make it.”

I couldn't believe she lost after all that talk before her match. So much for that!

When we were done going through the roster, we made our way to the Adventurers' Guild. We needed information on the competition.

“Elza's not here.”

Even if she were, should we really be asking her questions about the tournament?

“Hm?”

She's fighting too, remember? I'm not sure if she'll be too eager to tell us what she knows. We might end up facing off at some point, so I wasn't sure we could trust her information. *Let's try asking Dias or the other adventurers.*

“All right.”

We started looking for someone we could ask. At least, until Elza closed in on us like a frenzied shark.

“Frannie, it's been so long! Congrats on making it to the finals!” Elza was beaming. I felt silly for thinking that our tournament rivalry would change how

she felt about Fran. “I saw your fight. You sure showed them what you’re made of!”

“Hm.”

“I just wish you would’ve roughed up that Blue Cat a little more... You’re allowed to, you know?” Elza turned red with anger just recalling Fran’s match. It was safe to say that the Blue Cats were now her enemies, too.

“I didn’t want to get disqualified.”

“Unnecessary force towards the defeated is forbidden...right. Anyway, you seem different, Fran.”

“Hm?”

Elza scratched her chin. “How should I put it? You seem much stronger now, more reliable.”

“Training paid off.” All those long hours in the dungeons preparing for the tournament weren’t for nothing.

“Is that it? It feels like you did a lot of growing up while I wasn’t looking. I guess that’s what training and tournaments do for you.”

“Hm.”

“Anyway, what brings you to the guild today?”

“I’m looking for information on the competitors.”

“Really? I didn’t think you were the type to go researching your opponents.”

“Information is crucial.”

Fran loved the heat of battle, but she also considered herself an adventurer. Collecting data on monsters was standard practice. As much as she enjoyed fighting for its own sake, she took the tournament very seriously. She was here to win.

“Of course! Let’s see who you’re up against for your first round...huh?” Elza looked at the roster and tilted her head.

“You don’t know him?”

“No. I don’t think I’ve ever heard of an adventurer named Zehmet.”

Whoever he was, he wasn’t an Ulmutt local or a renowned adventurer. Still, the fact that he’d made it through the qualifiers proved his strength.

“Do you know anyone who does?”

“Let me try asking the others.” Elza did just that, but all we got was...

“Zehmet? Never heard of him.”

“Me either.”

“Are we supposed to know?”

None of them knew him. Zehmet definitely wasn’t from Ulmutt. Maybe he wasn’t an adventurer at all. The tournament attracted mercenaries, knights, and mages, all of them strong in their own regard. Phillip Christon was a chief example of this.

Doesn’t look like the guild knows about this Zehmet character. Let’s move on to something else.

“Hm. Know anything about the Dimitris Combat School?”

“Oh? Why do you ask?”

“I might end up fighting someone who knows it.”

“You know someone using the Dimitris Combat School?”

“I’ve never actually seen him use it.”

Elza nodded at Fran’s response. “Oooh, I see. He’s still in training, then.”

“Training?”

“Don’t you know? The Dimitris School is famous for the impositions it puts on its students. They have to reach A-Rank with their energies sealed by a special piece of manatech.”

Other adventurers chipped in with other bits of information on the Dimitris School. Candidates wore Sealing Spheres, which locked away some of their stats and skills. Hitting A-Rank under such handicaps sounded like an impossible task, but it explained the dramatic strength Colbert displayed in the battle of Bulbola.

He must've released his seal to fight Linford. Elza had teamed up with a student of the Dimitris School once and seen their skills up close.

"The one I knew was still a novice at the time, so they weren't all that impressive."

Spirit energy was the basis of the Dimitris School. Spirit was just one form of this world's magic. When magic was applied to weaponry or used to strengthen your body, it was referred to as Spirit. When used to cast spells, it was Mana. Despite being made of the same thing, Mana and Spirit differed in their applications. You could tell which of the two a person was more adept in by looking at the skills they had.

"The Dimitris School specializes in using Spirit. I don't know the details, but they can blend Spirit and Mana together to form some kind of hybrid."

"Spirit and Mana?"

"Yes. They can create blasts of Spirit energy, form shields, and cause massive internal damage with a single strike. I hear the advanced students can do even crazier things."

So firing off Kamehamehas wasn't the only trick they had up their sleeves? If anything, internal bleeding sounded more dangerous.

"But I don't think you'll have to worry about that in the tournament," Elza continued.

"Why not?"

"Students of the Dimitris School are not allowed to release their seals for the sake of personal gain. They can only do so to save innocents or crush the wicked."

Saving Bulbola was a good enough reason to unleash Colbert's seals, but a fighting tournament was out of the question. We might have the upper hand.

"Hm. I see."

"Anything else you want to ask?"

We had Identify data on Royce and Gaudartha, and were probably better acquainted with Amanda and Forlund. Which left the question of Radule.

“What can you tell me about Radule?”

“The old man’s strong, for one thing. He’s not as spry as he used to be, but he more than makes up for it with combat experience. He has all kinds of spells up his sleeve.”

“Like what?”

“Land, Ocean, and Storm. To my knowledge, anyway.”

That was impressive. I’d never seen anyone that could use three advanced forms of magic. Royce was closest, with his Moonlight and Timespace magicks. There was no telling how Radule might use Land and Ocean spells together. We would have to be on the lookout.

“What makes him so dangerous is the way he uses all the elements together.”

“What do you mean?”

“The last time I saw him fight a mob of goblins, he used Land Magic to dig a crater in an instant, then flooded it with Ocean. As if that wasn’t enough, then he used Storm Magic to prevent them from escaping. A couple minutes later, their drowned corpses were the only thing left in that hole.”

“I see.”

On top of Radule’s individual spells, we needed to keep his combinations of magicks in mind. Storm Magic could produce tornadoes and Land Magic could amplify it with blades. The combination of Storm and Ocean magicks could allow Radule to cast a thick fog over the arena. The old mage was sure to have thought of even more devastating combinations.

“Anything else?”

“Hm? Not at the moment.”

“Okay. Just come to talk to me if you have any more questions. I’ll tell you all I know!”

“Hm.”

“But I won’t go easy on you if we end up fighting in the tournament. I think it would be awfully rude of me, don’t you agree?”

“Of course.”

“Oh, I knew you’d understand! Tee hee.”

Elza grinned. The two of them looked awfully similar as battle-hungry smiles flashed over their faces. Elza was a blood knight, too! And here I thought she was being honest when Fran’s bloodthirst had surprised her earlier! Was it mandatory to be a battle junkie if you wanted to become a high-ranked adventurer?

Then again, their love of fighting monsters would help them climb the ranks. Maybe they were all like that, deep down.

Aside:

The Beast King “How’s the target, Royce? Any movement?”

“No, Lord Rig. And your incessant asking won’t make a difference.”

“So no plots to assassinate me yet?”

“Not by the looks of it. Fool she may be, but she clearly understands your strength.”

“Coward!”

“You have yourself to blame for this, my lord.”

“Because I scared her?”

“She was terrified of you.”

“I guess. She got so pale I thought she was gonna wet herself.”

“As provincial as your lordship is, please refrain from using such vulgar words.”

“Provincial? I *am* the Beast King.”

“All the more reason for you to act like one.”

“Oh, shut it. What’s the target up to now?”

“According to Godo, participating in the fighting tournament.”

“The qualifiers should be going on right now. Any news?”

“The target has passed the qualifiers. It’s why she is still under observation.”

“I might just hire her if she does well enough.”

“Unlikely. She hates you, you know.”

“Not happening, huh?”

“No.”

“Well, I guess I’ll do what I can to enjoy myself.”

“You are free to do as you please. Just make sure to put an end to it.”

“I know. You have nothing to worry about.”

“I shall leave it in your capable hands.”

“You got it! Heh heh... I can’t wait to see what happens next!”

Chapter 2:

The Nature of the Beast King A FEW DAYS AFTER our victory in the second round, Fran was in perfect form. She had slept, eaten, trained, and fluffed Jet's fur.

Did you sleep well, Fran?

"Hm..." said Fran, half-asleep. She rubbed her eyes as she ate breakfast. Despite her apparent sleepiness, her hand continued moving, determined to fill her belly.

Today's your first match in the finals.

"Hm..."

She was her usual sleepy self this morning. I thought that was excellent. If Fran were fully alert, I would've wondered whether she'd gotten any sleep at all. Today, like all the days before, Fran needed to bathe and have her hair dried and brushed. Which was precisely why I thought today, like all the days before it, she should be in top fighting form. That said, her hair was going to need some extra attention.

It's your big fight today, Fran. You have to look good for it.

"I don't care."

Oh, come on. Think of all the people who are going to see you.

Fran finally woke up as I was doing her hair. Her eyes lit up as she gave Jet the same treatment.

"You'll have to look pretty too, Jet."

"Woof!"

Jet squinted with pleasure and rolled over to show her his belly.

"Here?"

"Arf!"

He reminded me of a goofy Golden Retriever that an old man in my

neighborhood used to keep. Jet didn't seem like a wolf in the slightest, let alone a direwolf.

We have a few hours before we need to leave. Anything you want to do before then?

"Hm. Come here, Teacher."

Okay...what's up?

"Hm."

Fran produced a piece of cloth from her Pocket Dimension and began buffing my blade. She laid me on the bed and put her back into it.

Hey, you still have a match to fight. Don't go tiring yourself out, now.

"I'm fine."

But...

"I'm not the only one in the arena today."

What?

"Think of all the people who'll see you today. You need to look good, too," Fran said, continuing her maintenance.

As much as I wanted to thank her, I thought of myself as nothing more than a weapon in her arsenal. Try as I might to refuse, her expert hands were too much for me to resist.

Aah, yeah...that hits the spot.

"Here?"

Yep...right there...that's good!

"Hm!"

Thirty minutes later, my blade shone like a mirror. Fran wiped a bead of sweat from her chin and nodded at her reflection with satisfaction.

You still good on stamina?

"I'm fine."

Good. Exhausting herself for the sake of maintaining me would be putting the sword before the swordsman.

All right, let's get going.

"Hm!"

Fighters participating in the finals were told to gather at the guild. A-Block fighters needed to be especially early, since our fights started in the morning.

"A-11...Fran?"

"Hm."

A tournament official approached as soon as we entered the guildhall. The officials had probably memorized the faces of each fighter. "Right this way."

The man led us to a waiting room, formerly the guild's private quarters. The second and third floors had been converted for the contestants, since making everyone wait in the same room was bound to cause fights and scuffles. I could easily imagine Fran being the cause.

"You will be fighting in the sixth round today. Please wait here until then. Each match has a hard time limit of thirty minutes, so you will wait a maximum of two and a half hours."

"Hm. Sure."

"You will be allowed to watch other matches once you have finished your own, but please do not leave the room until then. You may be called up earlier if the preceding fights go faster."

The finals had a time limit to prevent slow matches and to allow the tournament to get on with its primary business. In the event the time ran out, judges would be called to decide the victor.

"If you need anything, just talk to the official outside your room."

The official would provide anything from light refreshments to last-minute shopping. Tournament finalists were treated like VIPs. Everything we needed was in our Pocket Dimension, so I doubted we would need to use him. Sure enough, Fran wasted no time in pulling out refreshments.

You know, you ate a lot on the way here...are you sure you should be eating this close to the fight?

“Hm!”

Fran was already stuffing her face full of curry before I could finish my sentence. I was worried it would slow her down in the match. Then again, whatever ill effects she suffered from the curry would be easily offset by the dramatic boost in motivation it provided. Besides, I doubted even a massive plate of it would fill her stomach to the brim.

Well, just take it slow.

“Don’t worry. I’m only half full.” She polished the plate off in a matter of minutes.

I’ll cast some Cleansing Magic so the room won’t stink as much.

She carried on with steak, a cutlet bowl, and finished up with cake for dessert. Fran ate and relaxed for about an hour until a knock came at the door.

“May I come in, Fran?”

“Hm,” Fran answered with a mouth full of whipped cream.

The official walked into the room and didn’t even blink at the sight. *He’s good at his job, this one.*

“The fourth round has just come to an end. Since your match is two rounds away, we would like for you to move to the waiting room near the arena, please.”

That was sooner than I expected. Fran asked the official about the matches so far and he told her that the first round had ended in a flash. Gaudartha won, as expected. The giant beastman closed in on his opponents as soon as the match began and knocked them out. No wonder he was the Beast King’s elite bodyguard.

The two fights after that took almost the entire thirty minutes. No one wanted the victor to be chosen by deliberation, so they fought each other to their absolute limits.

We made our way through an underground passage to the arena. Fan

favorites would cause too much of a ruckus if they took the land route. Private rooms awaited us near the arena, more luxurious than the waiting rooms at the guild hall. Ours came equipped with a fancy sofa and a feather-quilted bed. The organizers spared no expense.

“The fifth match will soon be underway. You may be called immediately, so please get ready.”

“Hm. Sure.”

“Please wait here until you are called.”

“Hm!”

Fran threw herself onto the fluffy sofa, clearly enjoying the cool touch of its leather, and perked up her ears to listen to what was going on outside. I followed her lead and strained to hear the match. Cruise should be up against Radule at the moment. The explosions I heard must have been the old mage’s spells.

Fran listened for a while before losing interest. She jumped onto the bed and played with Jet. I wanted to warn her to keep the direwolf off, but now wasn’t the time to be worried about that. Dirty bedsheets were a small price to pay for her peace of mind. I listened until the crowd became too loud to be intelligible.

Is the fight over?

It sure sounded like it was. I strained my ears again, listening for the commentator’s voice in all the noise.

“He did it! C-Rank adventurer Cruise pulls through a victory against all odds!”

Wait, seriously? Cruise won? Really?

“What is it, Teacher?” Fran asked, my surprise hadn’t escaped her.

Well, it sounds like Cruise beat Radule.

“Who’s Cruise?”

I just told you... Never mind. Anyway, you’re almost up. Get ready.

“Hm. Okay.”

Fran ordered Jet to return to the shadows and set me on her back. She

finished by storing away the snacks she was munching on. A tournament official came to fetch us, and we left the comfortable confines of the waiting room.

“Right this way.”

“Hm.”

The path to the arena was wide and well-lit.

You nervous?

“Should I be?”

I talked to Fran to ease her nerves, but it didn’t seem like she had any. In fact, she was in such a good mood that she was almost skipping. She couldn’t wait to throw down with whoever this Zehmet was.

Didn’t think you’d be nervous. Guess you’re ready for your first match.

“Can’t wait.”

Jet, only come out on our mark.

Woof.

We passed through the hallway and entered the arena, which was twice as large as the one from the second round. There were about ten times as many spectators, too. No one could make out what they were saying as their thunderous applause combined into a deafening roar, descending on us from the bleachers like a waterfall. It reminded me of the finals of the World Cup back on Earth.

“Ugh.” Fran flopped down her ears.

You all right?

“Hm...I’m fine now.”

Good thing she adapted fast. Exceptional hearing might be a problem here. The deafening applause made me wonder if beastmen like Royce were at a disadvantage. As the loud noise flustered Fran, an unknown voice rang through the arena.

“The time has come for the sixth match of A-Block! Making her way to the ring is the adorable A-11. But don’t let her looks fool you! This is the talk of the

town, the newly minted C-Rank, the Swordceress Fran!”

On the commentator’s mark, Fran stepped into the ring. Her opponent was already waiting for her there.

“Hrmph.”

She frowned when she saw what she was facing. It was no exaggeration to say that she was dripping with resentment.

“Her opponent is A-12, the young leader of the mercenary band Blue Pride! One of the up-and-coming figures of the Blue Cat tribe! Blue Lightning Zehmet!”

A Blue Cat. And the leader of Blue Pride, at that. Fran glared at Zehmet and drew me from my sheath. She took a step forward, showing her murderous intent.

I didn’t expect to be fighting another Blue Cat so soon. He was my enemy as long as he was Fran’s. He would’ve been mincemeat by now if we had run into him outside the city walls, but we would have to show some degree of restraint here.

Fran confronted Zehmet in the center of the ring.

“Hey there. Looks like you’ve met one of my people already,” Zehmet said, smiling like some kind of cheap prince.

“...”

‘Met one of your people’? We would’ve killed him if it wouldn’t have disqualified us!

Fran maintained her silent glare.

“Uh, do you have to keep glaring at me?”

“Hmph.” She had no intention of hiding her hostility.

Zehmet responded with a bitter smile, scratching his head. “I-I know! How about we shake hands as a show of good faith?” His smile was friendly as he extended his arm.

“Don’t touch me with your dirty hands.”

“Oh...”

He looked heartbroken. He was putting on quite a show, though. I almost felt sorry for him. But of course he was acting—he was a Blue Cat. Not that I spotted Acting among his skill list...but Blue Cats were the enemies of the Black Cats. It was written in their DNA. That handshake might've been followed up with a knife for all I knew.

“...”

And yet Zehmet still stuck out his hand in the hopes that Fran would take it. When she didn't, he bowed his head to her.

“I've suspended Seith.”

“Hm?”

Who's Seith?

“He's the guy you beat in the second qualifiers.”

“Because he lost to a Black Cat?”

A proud Blue Cat lost to a lowly Black Cat. I didn't think the leader of Blue Pride would've let him off easy. Maybe “suspend” was code for “hanging,” but Zehmet corrected her.

“No. His words were out of line, even if they were under the pretense of firing up the crowd. I apologize for his sake.”

“...!”

Zehmet hung his head low. The declaration shocked Fran and baffled me, especially because he was telling the truth. I'd activated Essence of Falsehood as soon as Zehmet started talking...but he hadn't uttered a single lie so far.

“I plan on demoting Seith from his position, as well. I want to eliminate the prejudice against Black Cats.”

Fran was confused by these impossible words. “What are you talking about, Blue Cat? Have you lost your mind?”

“Ha ha...you would think that. And I understand that you don't believe me. But trust me when I say that I have no intention of underestimating you, and that I despise the slave trade.”

Fran looked at him with suspicion. She couldn't trust him. Who was to say this wasn't all a ploy to make her go easy on him? "If you want to fool me, you need to come up with better lies," she spat, but there were no lies here.

Fran, this guy hasn't told a single lie so far.

Are you kidding me?

Wish I was. He's telling the truth. He really is sorry.

Fran bored deep into Zehmet's eyes. He didn't waver, because he had nothing to hide. Even so, Fran couldn't believe it. "You're lying!" she screamed in a flustered rage.

I sympathized with her confusion. It was like meeting a mob boss who turned out to actually be a good person. The encounter would've been difficult to believe under any circumstance, but it was even more impossible to take in right before a battle.

Calm down, Fran. It doesn't change what we came here to do.

Whether Zehmet was telling the truth or not didn't matter. For now, we had a fight to win.

"Hm. I'll cut you down, then think about it," Fran muttered, readying her blade.

"You're right. This is not the time for such discussion." Zehmet had no intention of backing out, either. He drew his blades—one on his back and one on his hip. This guy was a dual-wielder.

He's strong, Fran.

But he's a Blue Cat.

Even then, he's strong.

All right...

Zehmet had a good balance of skills and stats. As a mercenary, he was able to wield multiple weapons, but he preferred swords. No wonder he made it through the qualifiers. He was evolved, too—a Blue Leopard, to be precise. Underestimating him would be a bad move.

Name: Zehmet Age: 36

Race: Blue Cat; Blue Leopard Class: Blitz Knight Level: 53/99

HP: 541; Magic: 236; Strength: 217; Agility: 322

Skills: Stealth 3; Evasion 5; Danger Sense 6; Bow Arts 3; Bow Mastery 4; Vigilance 4; Sword Arts 8; Sword Mastery 10; Advanced Sword Mastery 2; Command 6; Raise Morale 3; Kick Arts 4; Kick Mastery 5; Blink 10; Flash Step 3; Interrogate 4; Spear Arts 2; Spear Mastery 3; Dual Blade Mastery 5; Elemental Blade 2; Climb 7; Poison Resistance 3; Water Magic 3; Paralysis Resistance 2; Spirit Manipulation; Sense of Direction; Night Vision Class Skill: Awaken; Blitz Blade; Leopard Paw Titles: Glorious Founder Equipment: Azure Dragon Fang Shortsword; Adamantine Alloy Longsword; Hydra Full Plate; Greatwing Dragon Feather Cloak; Bracelet of Status Resistance; Ring of Life Regeneration “Are the contestants ready?”

“Hm.”

“Any time you are.”

“Very well. Begin!”

The fight commenced, and the combatants immediately made their move.

“Haaa!”

“Raargh!”

Fran threw the entire weight of her anger into her swing. While inelegant, the strike could end the fight in one blow. Zehmet crossed his blades together to block her attack, attempting to knock me out of Fran’s hands. She held on tight thanks to her superior strength and Sword Mastery.

They clashed swords, trading blows and weaving in feints to make the other drop their guard. Blow after killing blow was dodged and deflected, and it looked like they were an even match. But Fran dealt with Zehmet’s dual blades with only one of me, and eventually she got the upper hand. Sword Mastery was paying off.

Meanwhile, Zehmet was having trouble keeping up with Fran’s calm and calculated strikes. He had to turn this around before it was too late.

“Blitz Blade!”

“Hmph!”

“Urgh!”

Blitz Blade, the Class Skill of the Blitz Knight, was a high-velocity strike. It was fast, but nothing Fran couldn't handle. In fact, the attack's speed made it a prime target for a counter-strike. Zehmet managed to block her counter with his shortsword, but she was getting the hang of it. She'd get him next time for sure. He had the same idea, and stopped using Blitz Blade altogether.

He jumped back a great distance, abandoning his offensive. The ten-meter leap happened so fast that Fran couldn't keep up.

“Ugh!”

Fran widened her eyes, straining to get a read on Zehmet's next move. This was probably an effect of his other Class Skill, Leopard Paw.

“You're very strong,” he said.

Fran stared at Zehmet. Her confusion and doubt had vanished. “You're not bad, I guess,” she admitted.

“Thank you.”

Fran raised her eyebrows at his honest and straightforward gratitude.

“I knew Black Cats could be strong, too. Discriminating against them *is* a mistake.”

“...”

Now that Fran had settled down, she was more prepared to accept the man's honest stance. She finally understood that his earlier apology was authentic.

“Never seen a Blue Cat who wasn't a piece of garbage.” She held no malice towards him, despite her words. Fran looked at Zehmet with genuine curiosity.

“Heh...yeah... We really do need to change our ways,” Zehmet laughed bitterly. While honest, Fran's words were still heartbreaking. He readied himself again, remembering that they were still on a battlefield. “But just because I've apologized to you doesn't mean I'm going to let you win. My band's name is at

stake here. I'll be taking this round."

"That's my line." Fran readied me again, but her curiosity brought a faint smile to her lips.

"Huff..."

I felt Zehmet gather his magical energy.

"Awaken...!"

His body started to swell as soon as he uttered the word. His muscles expanded, especially his thighs and calves. Black and blue spots dotted his body like his namesake, the Blue Leopard.

"The blood of the Blue Leopard enhances all of my physical abilities. I am not the same man you fought earlier. Prepare yourself. Blitz Blade!"

Zehmet disappeared.

CLANG! A high-pitched ring resounded throughout the arena.

"Ungh!"

Fran could only block Zehmet's strike. The attack came out of nowhere. It felt like he had teleported.

"Didn't expect you to block it the first time...haaaa!"

Awaken was buffing him. He got an additional thirty to all of his stats, pumping his Agility to over two hundred—on par with some A-Rank adventurers. This was the power of an evolved Blue Cat! This man was the fastest fighter we'd seen to date!

Adding to his already immense speed, he used Flash Step and Leopard Paw to run circles around his enemies. He chipped away at them with Blitz Blade, whittling them away at maximum velocity. A weaker adventurer would've been torn to shreds.

Fran avoided all of his meaty strikes. She had spent a lot of time practicing her Sense skills in the dungeon and could anticipate where Zehmet's attacks were coming from. As long as she could see them, she could deflect them.

"Impossible...!"

Zehmet panicked. As strong as Fran was, he didn't expect her to defeat his evolved form. He was more experienced, more skilled, more powerful than her. Panic turned to power as he intensified his assault. Zehmet's plan was to break through Fran's defenses with sheer speed, but his velocity came at a cost. His attacks were indeed faster, but they lost the feints and combinations which made them so dangerous. His speed might have overwhelmed other fighters, but it had little effect on Fran. In fact, his greatest weapon made him predictable.

"Stone Wall."

"Ack...!"

A knee-high wall erupted in Zehmet's way as he came in from behind. The spell launched his body several feet in the air. He was like a bike rider who'd rammed into a guardrail at full speed.

"You saw right through me...?!"

Zehmet was shocked by Fran's spells, each perfectly anticipating his attack. He really shouldn't be talking to himself in a fight.

"Inferno Burst."

"Guh!"

Fran launched a Flame spell at the defenseless Zehmet, but we had underestimated Leopard Paw. He managed to execute something like an Air Hop by kicking out mid-flight. I thought we had him, but the Blue Cat managed to dodge our killing spell.

Damn it!

This guy didn't know how to quit! No wonder he was the leader of his own mercenary band! But Fran was still in complete control, and I was intent on watching her from the best seat in the house. I remained calm as Inferno Burst dispersed before my eyes, but Fran managed to be even calmer.

"Vernier."

"When did you...?!"

Fran used the shade cast by her Flame spell to prepare her next attack. She

was already accelerating when she saw Zehmet dodge Inferno Burst. If the spell didn't take him down, then she'd do it herself.

"Haaaa!"

"Gaaaah!"

Fran wasn't going to lose a battle of velocity. Not even against an Awakened Zehmet. Her sudden speed shocked him, as though she had teleported right behind him. He had never fought anyone faster than him, and was powerless to defend against her. He threw his left sword at her while thrusting his right, but his desperate swings bore no fruit. Fran stored the thrown weapon inside her Pocket Dimension, while the other blade merely grazed her cheek.

"Urgh!"

"Aaaargh!"

In the blink of an eye, she had chopped Zehmet's foot right off. Dismemberment was probably good enough to secure her victory, but Fran considered the possibility he could recover and threw him out of the ring. Blood gushed in an arc from his amputated foot as he slammed into the wall. Fran stood alone in the center of the ring and smiled. Victory was hers.

"And she's done it again! An astounding match from both fighters! Did you catch all that, folks? The agility, the grace, the violence? Because this commentator sure didn't! They were rolling around at the speed of sound!" the commentator blared in resignation.

The fighters of the match had the speed of A-Ranks.

"Your winner is the *Enfant Terrible*, the *Swordceress*, Fran! At twelve years old, she is the youngest finalist this tournament has ever seen!"

The crowd burst with applause. I guess Fran just broke the age record.

After her victory over Zehmet, Fran left the clamor of the crowd behind. An official guided her back to the waiting room.

"Congratulations on winning the first round."

"Hm."

“Your next fight will be the day after tomorrow. It will be held at the same time as today.”

“Got it.”

“That will be all for now. Feel free to enjoy yourself.”

After making the requisite announcements, the official left and we discussed our plans for the rest of the day.

What now?

I want to see the fights.

Good idea. I think we can make Colbert’s match.

Hm. I want to watch the others, too.

Fran had never had the chance to watch others do battle. Seeing how other combatants handled themselves would be a good experience for her. It would raise her spirits, too.

Let’s get going, then.

Hm.

As we were about to leave the guild, the tournament official called out to us again. “Are you going to watch the fights?”

“Yeah.”

“May I recommend a change of clothes? The spectators might recognize you and cause a ruckus.”

Tournament fans would be able to tell who Fran was at a glance. With all the money riding on the fights, it wasn’t hard to imagine that she would be called out by sore losers and perverts who had a thing for little girls.

“I’ll be discreet.”

“Thank you.”

Nothing a little Stealth and Conceal Presence couldn’t fix. She took a hooded cloak from her Pocket Dimension, put it on, and resumed her trek to the arena. Contestants were allowed to use the back entrance—Fran only needed to flash

her adventurer card. Even then, the seats were absolutely packed.

So many people.

No wonder a lot of folks are standing around.

There were no empty seats, and I was beginning to wonder if Fran would have to stand like everyone else. After a few minutes of searching, we saw an entire empty block. Did a whole group just leave?

There we are.

“Hm.”

Fran took a seat, which was in perfectly working order. As I wondered about the reason for the vacancies, the answer came sauntering up.

“What are you sitting around here for?”

“Hm?”

“Reserved seats. Get outta here, kid.”

“Our boss is coming over later, see!”

Some rowdy roughhousers were keeping these seats for themselves, scaring their fellow spectators away with threats. A quick Identify revealed them to be street thugs, strong enough to intimidate regular townsfolk into submission. But Fran was used to meaner adventurers than these. To her, they were nothing more than poorly behaved citizens. She understood that they were picking a fight, and proceeded to give them exactly what they wanted.

“Stun Bolt.”

“Gyaa!”

“Aieeee!”

“Oof!”

She knocked out the three men with a single bolt and piled their unconscious bodies in the hallway. The other spectators were shocked at the sudden display of violence, their eyes turning to saucers. They looked away from the two nameless figures duking it out in the ring, and set their gaze firmly on Fran. If this went on, they might even figure out who she was.

Fran, pull your hood down more.

“Hm.”

What should we do with these guys? Just leave them here?

“Hm...Jet?”

“Arf.”

The audience panicked as Jet sprang out of Fran’s shadow. She wasn’t the least bothered and proceeded to load two of the thugs on his back. Jet lifted the third one by his collar.

“Put them away somewhere.”

“Woof.”

“That’ll do it.”

Serves them right. They were causing trouble for everyone here.

Fran sent him off and returned to her seat. The other spectators began to take the seats around her. None of them attempted to talk, having the good sense to avoid whatever she was about. Things settled down, and we were finally able to watch the match.

The thugs’ boss came looking for his lackeys a little later, but one look at Fran was enough to make him turn tail and run. The look on the leader’s face said he knew exactly who’d taken his seat, and he wanted nothing to do with her. That was the only problem we ran into, if you could even call it one.

There was one other issue, I guess. Amanda’s and Colbert’s matches ended so fast that we couldn’t learn anything about them.

Colbert was up against a mage named Akasa. He was a red-haired man decked out in flowing black robes. He certainly looked strong. A quick run through his skill sheet suggested that he used Illusion Magic to make copies of himself before taking his opponent down with a powerful Wind spell. I wouldn’t be surprised if Akasa took notes from Dias.

“Hello, Colbert,” he said, on entering the ring. “It must be my lucky day.”

“You think so?”

“My battle plan is well suited to dealing with fighters like yourself. This match is as good as mine. Victory will be sweet.”

“Heh, well, you sound confident. I just hope you’re not getting ahead of yourself.”

“I have no need to be confident. Our match is a solved equation.”

Akasa had a point. Colbert’s lack of Sense skills meant he would have a hard time against his illusions...

“Take this!”

“Urgh!”

...if only Akasa had time to cast a single spell. Within five seconds of the match’s start, Colbert closed in on the mage and landed a punch square in his gut. That was the end of it. They spent more time talking than fighting.

Akasa’s battle plan consisted of putting some distance between him and his opponent. He had no way of dealing with a faster opponent who could close in quickly. This was the problem with many mages, now that I thought about it. The restricted arena meant that melee fighters had an advantage.

This might be why there were so few mages in the tournament. That information was well worth the five seconds of the fight.

Go in fast when you’re up against mages, I suppose.

Hm!

Amanda’s fight came next, and it was even worse. We couldn’t glean anything from it. She was up against Romucchio, a half-naked man with muscles that out-bulged Elza’s.

“Ga ha ha ha! Looks like I’m fighting one hell of a beauty today!”

“Hello to you, too.”

“Oooh! You get my blood boiling, girl!”

“ ... ”

Amanda smiled, but it soon faded as Romucchio began posing. His skin was oiled, and Amanda looked disgusted as he flexed his muscles. We could feel her

intent to kill all the way from the bleachers. Romucchio totally missed the cue. The big muscleman continued his routine, grinning suggestively at Amanda.

“Baby, I’m going to put you into a hard and oily submission!”

“ ... ”

“Then, I’ll bury you in my pecs!”

“Urp.” Amanda gagged slightly before flipping into battle mode.

The match started...

Thwack!

...and ended with a loud explosion. Romucchio was no longer in the ring. The audience didn’t have time to cheer. The big, oily man slammed into a wall with a wet thud. Even the judges needed time to process what just happened.

Amanda had cracked her whip as soon as the match began and sent him flying. The average person wouldn’t have been able to tell what happened, but it didn’t escape our notice.

And here I thought she’d put more effort into it.

“Hm...”

Amanda had been more serious during our last mock battle. I guess she had to hold back to keep from killing Romucchio. The audience laughed as the tournament officials struggled to carry his unconscious body away, but Fran and I were disappointed.

Elza and Charlotte’s fight was much more interesting. Charlotte’s dancing combat style was as artistic as it was dangerous. She literally danced circles around Elza, attacking her with her metal hoop. The large ring was designed not only to cause damage, but also to catch on an opponent’s weapon to yank it from their hands.

Charlotte continued her assault with a Water spell, creating a rainbow as it faded. Combined with her beautiful dancing, the battle looked more like a performance than an all-out brawl. You would be forgiven for thinking of it that way, if it weren’t for the loud shrieks of metal crashing into metal. The crowd loved it, but despite their support, Charlotte wasn’t strong enough to defeat

Elza.

“There!”

“Aaahn!”

“Um...what?”

“Oh, that feels so good! Give me more!”

The metal hoop smacked Elza in the rear and she squealed with pleasure. Her reaction startled Charlotte and threw her off balance. Transmute Pain allowed its user to convert pain into pleasure. As if that wasn't enough, this particular user was a masochist at heart, and I doubted Charlotte had ever encountered anyone like her. She kept up her assault as best she could until a kick from Elza sent her flying.

“I see you!”

“Urgh! How did you—”

“Your feints are getting a little predictable, honey.”

When Elza broke through Charlotte's illusion-inducing dances, the fight was as good as done.

“Haaa!”

“Kyaaa!”

Dodging Elza's gigantic mace took everything Charlotte had.

“Hee hee. Gotcha!”

“Agh! No! I can't get away...”

“You have some nice moves, dear. Just needs a little more oomph.”

“Wait, what are—aaaaah!”

“Buh-bye now!”

Elza caught Charlotte by the back of her neck and flung her out of the ring. With that, the match came to a satisfying end. Both combatants had given it their all.

We learned a lot from the other matches, too—including the creative use of

skills I'd never even thought of. For example, there was a bandit who intentionally buffed his opponent's sense of smell before throwing a stink bomb. We might never need to use that, but it was interesting to see a status buff used to inflict a disadvantage.

We also learned a lot about Steel Magic after seeing it in action. You could melt your opponent's weaponry and control the arena by heating up parts of the ground, for example. And the subtle usage of Compound Magic made me want to invest a few points in it.

As for Fran, she was more than sufficiently motivated. She fidgeted so much I could feel it through my sheath. She was like a schoolboy watching his friends play a videogame, waiting for his turn.

There's a lot of strong fighters here.

Hm!

The sun was setting by the time the scheduled fights were over.

Let's go back to the inn.

"Hmm..." Fran tilted her head.

Or is there somewhere you want to check out first?

Fran took a sword from her Pocket Dimension. It looked familiar. Where had I seen it before?

"I accidentally took Zehmet's sword."

Zehmet's Azure Dragon Fang Shortsword. The one he threw at her in calculated desperation. I'd wondered where that went. The blade was quite strong and would sell for a decent price.

Yeah, we should probably give that back.

"Hm."

As hostile as Blue Pride was, we couldn't say the same about Zehmet. I kind of liked him, and Fran seemed to feel the same way.

Jet, can you track his scent?

"Woof!"

No problems there. We followed Jet for a good twenty minutes before he led us to the city outskirts.

Is this the place?

“Woof.”

The empty lot didn't have much in the way of housing, but there were tents set up here and there. They were tied down with logs, and looked intimidating. Blue Pride probably couldn't get a place to stay, and so had set up their own little base camp. Paying for the entire crew's accommodation took money, and the mercenary band was probably used to camping.

How were we supposed to find Zehmet in all these tents? I wanted to avoid contact with the other Blue Cats as much as possible. Suddenly, someone came towards us.

“You!” a girl in her teens shouted furiously. I remembered her pointing her finger at us outside of Aurel's mansion, along with the rest of Blue Pride. Fran had intimidated her into submission and left her to Elza's mercy.

“Do I know you?”

Of course, Fran didn't remember. But she still hated Blue Cats in general, especially the weak ones.

“Hmph! My name is Selen! Lieutenant of Blue Pride!”

This girl was their lieutenant?! She had terrible stats, although she did have Rhetoric and Threaten under her skills. Maybe she conspired her way to her position? Then again, she didn't look that smart, either...

“I'm Fran.” Fran had been openly hostile to every Blue Cat she had ever met, but her encounter with Zehmet changed her. She was giving the girl a chance to convince her she didn't deserve to be ruthlessly beat up.

“I know who you are! You're only here to mock us! What more could you want?!” Not that Selen was going to return the favor.

“I wanted to give this back.”

“This is...my brother's sword! You thief!”

So much for preserving civility. But...was this Zehmet's sister? That explained how she got her position.

"How did a Black Cat like you beat my brother, anyway? It doesn't make sense!"

"I'm stronger."

"You're lying! Black Cats are nothing but trash! You couldn't have beaten my brother in a fair fight! You must've cheated!"

"I didn't."

"I know you did! My brother would never have lost to a Black Cat!"

Her angry stomping made her look even more childish than she already was. She really hated the Black Cats. I had a hard time believing that she was related to Zehmet.

"Look, I don't know what dirty trick you pulled, but give him your spot in the second round and I'll forgive you!" she said, sounding like she was doing us a favor.

Fran narrowed her eyes. "No." Her mood was worsening with every word. Zehmet's fool sister was exhausting all the goodwill her brother had built up.

"Is that supposed to be a joke? Did you not hear what I said? You're supposed to thank me for forgiving you!"

Was this girl really his sister? She acted nothing like him. Either way, Fran had decided that she wasn't worth talking to. She pursed her lips and tossed Selen an ice-cold stare.

"..."

"This is the problem with you stupid Black Cats! You don't know your place!"

"..."

"What are you staring at me for? Do you know what's going to happen if you don't resign from the tournament?"

"I don't." Fran was furious, but she held back because this girl was Zehmet's sister. It was admirable, though I didn't know how much longer she could last.

“Hmph. You Black Cats are only around because we Blue Cats allow you to exist.”

“Urgh.”

“If you don’t retire, you’re not the only one who’s going to pay. We’ll get every last Black Cat and sell you into slavery!”

Bad move. Selen just had to go and say the s-word. Fran had dedicated her life to bettering the living conditions of Black Cats everywhere. The Blue Cat had crossed the line.

“Eeek!”

Fran’s intent to kill was at its peak. Especially since Dias had told her about Kiara. Well, we tried. This girl was a lost cause. We might have to annihilate Blue Pride altogether. I felt bad for Zehmet, but his crew seemed to be stereotypical Blue Cat scum. Better to wipe them off the map in case the survivors tried to take revenge on us.

Selen screamed in fear, her face growing pale at Fran’s murderous aura. She fell on her rear and trembled, not even noticing the fluid pooling on the ground around her.

“Aaah...!”

Her pathetic cry was barely intelligible, but Fran was past the point of sympathy. She drew me without a word and swung, her eyes brimming with cold fury. It was overkill, but Selen brought it on herself.

However, the blow never landed. A figure bolted out to cover her with the speed of a bullet.

“Urfh...!”

“B-brother!”

Zehmet took the blade that was meant for his sister. It went through his ribs and into his left lung. Selen glared at Fran, but Zehmet turned on his sister.

“Why...must you have such an unruly mouth...?!”

“Brother, are you all right?! Black Cat...! How dare you—?!”

“Stop...!”

“Yah!”

Zehmet slapped Selen. He was weakened by the injury, but the force of the strike was still enough to knock the girl back, marking her cheek with red fury. She sat in stunned silence, not understanding what was happening.

Meanwhile, Zehmet proceeded to fall on his face, apologizing to Fran for his sister’s wrongdoing. Blood seeped from his open wound.

“I apologize...for my foolish sister...”

“I’m sorry.” But Fran refused to back down. Her murderous thoughts had already overwhelmed her.

“I won’t...let them say anything so foolish ever again...! I’ll retrain them... anyone who refuses will be let go... no... I’ll sell them into slavery myself!” Zehmet declared, making clear that this policy would even apply to his sister.

He knew this was the only hope of quelling Fran’s rage. Their fight in the tournament told him that she was vastly superior to his entire crew. She would have no problem annihilating them all.

“Brother, what are you saying? Why are you apologizing to that—ah!”

“Quiet...”

He batted his own sister away as she crawled towards him. Quite hard, too. She hurtled several meters away before she stopped, unconscious.

“I am sorry...please forgive me.”

Zehmet might die mid-apology. His strength was steadily draining away. The commotion hadn’t gone unnoticed, and I sensed the other Blue Cats peeking out to see what was going on.

Fran? The rest of Blue Pride is moving in.

“I am so...so sorry,” he said.

“Ugh.”

Do what you think is right. I’m with you all the way.

“Greater Heal.”

Although she hesitated, Fran healed Zehmet’s wounds. She still hated their whole tribe, but she wasn’t going to take it out on the one Blue Cat she could actually get along with.

“I’m leaving. If you haven’t changed your ways the next time I see you, your crew is done.”

“Thank you so much!” Zehmet fell on his face again, knowing he had evaded the full weight of Fran’s wrath by inches. Fran didn’t answer, but turned around and ran. Conflicting emotions raged inside her.

Are you sure you should’ve let them go?

“I didn’t. I just delayed the inevitable.”

Well, as long as you’re okay with it.

Fran ran with no destination in mind. The only thing she wanted was to sort out her jumbled-up feelings. People stared at her as she zipped past, but it couldn’t be helped. She could run all she wanted if it meant she felt better.

A few minutes later, she was finally settled down. She walked slowly, her raging emotions suppressed by exhaustion. Some thugs set their eyes on her, but I did them a favor and dealt with them using Telekinesis. If they’d tried anything funny, Fran would have vented her rage. Fortunately, no one was stupid enough to mess with a girl emitting such a dangerous aura.

“...”

Of course she was in a bad mood. She had finally entertained the possibility of a friendship with Zehmet. Maybe he wasn’t the only decent member of his tribe, but in the end, Blue Cats will be Blue Cats. Zehmet was the exception.

I didn’t know if we could fix our relationship with him. Fran certainly wanted to be friends, but if we ran into his crew again, we would probably end up fighting. Worse, she might end up killing him. She certainly couldn’t forgive Selen, who’d pissed me off too, to be honest. She talked about selling people into slavery like selling a piece of armor. If Zehmet hadn’t protected her, she would be dead.

Fran walked around town in a storm of emotions. About twenty minutes later, she stopped and turned around.

This aura...

“Beast King?”

The explosion of mana and aggression came from the direction of the Blue Pride encampment. Even from this great distance, we could feel it.

“...!”

Fran panicked, and ran back the way she had come. There was no mistaking the Beast King’s mana. It didn’t feel like he was merely stretching his legs, either. As confused as Fran was, she channeled all her energy into speed—her camaraderie with Zehmet mixed with her fear of the Beast King.

Are you sure, Fran? The Beast King is there!

“Hm!”

I couldn’t tell whether she was prepared to face the consequences of her actions, but Fran knew there was no going back. She sprinted the whole way back to the encampment, and we reached it not five minutes later.

“Huff...huff...!”

It’s him!

The encampment was engulfed in flames. The Beast King stood in the center of the holocaust, wreathed in golden fire. The scene looked like an illustration straight from a tyrant’s repertoire. His silence loomed over the encampment.

Zehmet was on the ground, seemingly burnt to a crisp. His armor was heated to the point that it looked like hard candy, while the leather had turned to ash. One look was enough to tell that he was nearly dead.

The Beast King’s stats had grown since we last saw him. He looked different, too. His hair stood on end, framing his face in a mane. Black rings surrounded his eyes, and his fangs extended past his lips. He looked like a lion in its full glory.

He’s evolved...

The Beast King was using his Awakened form, just like Zehmet had when he fought Fran.

“Now, what kind of idiot would go against my orders like that?”

“Urgh...”

“Well, time to put you out of your misery.”

The Beast King gathered fire in his right hand. Fran didn’t hesitate.

“I’m going, Teacher!”

She didn’t even wait for my answer before leaping into action. She grasped me in her right hand and equipped the instant-kill sword, Death Gaze, in her left. She cast a spell to accelerate herself, and sped towards the Beast King like a bullet. But she kept quiet, suppressing her murderous aura. Fran wasn’t in a blind rage. This was a calculated effort to take the Beast King’s life.

His Sense skills were good, but not as good as Dias’. Considering he was an S-Rank, they certainly could be better. Fran could have shouted to stop him from killing Zehmet, but it would be a bad move. Zehmet would die if it didn’t work, and it would strip Fran of the element of surprise. This was her only chance. She had to take the initiative. There was a high likelihood that this would end badly one way or another, but Fran had made her choice.

She would try to decapitate him with one strike. Fran wasn’t thinking about the potential consequences: becoming a fugitive of the beastman nation or the political scandal that might arise from an assassination attempt. Her only priority was saving Zehmet’s life.

Besides, the Beast King’s Bracelet of Sacrifice would save him from instant death. As bad as an assassination attempt would look, an *actual* assassination might throw the world into war. The Bracelet of Sacrifice probably emboldened Fran. He would die, it would activate, and the time it took to raise him from the dead would be enough to save Zehmet.

If I was thinking only of Fran’s safety, I would teleport us out of here and let the Beast King have his way. I knew that was the best option. But I also knew that Fran wouldn’t be satisfied with that. If her safety was my only priority, I would’ve stopped her from becoming an adventurer in the first place. I wanted

to go adventuring with her. I was her guardian as well as her sword. My job was to protect her while carrying out her will. If she wanted to jump off a cliff, my job was to make sure she landed safely. I had Fran's back, for better or worse.

Fran crossed her swords as she charged towards the Beast King's back. She focused her mana on the blades, which looked like a pair of giant scissors. Surely this would penetrate the Beast King's defenses, no matter how powerful he was. She closed her menacing shears on the Beast King's neck.

"...?!"

The blades didn't even scratch him. Fran couldn't believe it. She looked at me in utter shock.

"No!"

"What? And who are you supposed to be?" At least her attempt on the Beast King's life had distracted him from Zehmet, although his full attention was now on her.

Fran couldn't answer. Her face was pale as she stared at me.

Death Gaze had broken in the assault, and so had I. The only things left were my hilt and handle.



Fran couldn't understand it. However, as the offended party, I knew exactly what had happened. The golden flames wrapped around the Beast King's body had melted me and Death Gaze as soon as we touched them. The fire was hot enough to boil cold steel. I suspected that the only reason it didn't raze the place where the Beast King stood was because of one of his skills.

"Teacher!" Fran called out in her panic.

"Teacher? Who are you talking about?" The Beast King looked at her quizzically.

Calm down, Fran. I'm all right. Switch to Telepathy for now.

Thank goodness...

Fortunately, the damage wasn't anything I couldn't recover from, although regenerating from a literal meltdown took a lot of mana. Good thing I had Self-Repair.

Death Gaze was probably a goner. I couldn't detect any mana coming from it. Fran's Black Cat Cloak wasn't repairing itself from the peripheral burns, either. Maybe it was still fixing itself, but it was definitely taking longer than usual.

How do we get past those flames...?

They were dangerous, and not just because of their destructive power. The flames reacted even when the Beast King had his back to us. It was a powerful automatic shield. How much stronger would it be if the Beast King actually directed it? Dodging it would be difficult; blocking downright impossible.

"You this Blue Cat's disciple?"

"..."

"Answer me, kid."

"What...did you do to Zehmet?"

Fran glared at him. The Beast King shrugged in response. He didn't seem pleased with her attitude, but his eyes were grinning with delight. I knew those eyes well. They were as battle hungry as Fran's.

"Heh. You're not supposed to answer a question with another question.

Manners wouldn't kill you, Black Cat."

His condescending tone made Fran grind her teeth. She suppressed her anger and asked again. "Why are you killing him?"

"You hard of hearing or something? Fine. Disciplinary action against an unruly subordinate, that's why."

Unruly subordinate... So Zehmet was one of his men. Did he go against the Beast King's orders? Zehmet was for Black Cats and the Beast King was against them. Was that it?

"Anyway, you seem to be chummy with him. Can't imagine why, what with you being Black and him Blue."

"Hm..."

"Hang on, did your sword just fix itself? Neat."

Instant Regeneration brought my blade back quickly, but it was probably useless against him. Keeping our distance with spells was the better approach. Frost and Water were our best bets against Flame. Putting points into those two magicks seemed like a pretty good idea.

"Fran...don't..."

"I'll save you, Zehmet."

"Ha ha ha! Such beautiful friendship between a Black Cat and a Blue! It'd be funny if it weren't so twisted!"

"Shut up..." Zehmet spat.

The king turned to the dying leader of Blue Pride with an entertained smirk. "You can still talk? Impressive. It's a shame, you know? You had so much potential. Kid, you're about to see what happens to those who oppose me. You're about to feel the wrath of Rigdith Nalasincha!"

The flames around Rigdith danced more violently. Just grazing those golden flames would be the end of us.

Fran and the Beast King clashed in an explosion of aggression.

"Haaa...!"

Fran made the first move. Instead of leaping back, she charged right at him.

“Ha ha ha! You actually made it through my Intimidate! Very good!”

She shot at him with a water-element Aura Blade, but alas, it was immediately evaporated by the Beast King’s flames. Immediately after nullifying her attack, the flames snaked towards her.

“Hm!”

“Hah! Nice dodge!”

Fran leapt backwards at the last moment. That was close. These things were much faster than I thought.

Those flames are downright deadly!

“Hm!”

“So, what’s your next move? You gonna charge in, knowing you’ll get burned to cinders?”

“Stun Bolt!”

Pale blue lightning shot towards the Beast King. It had no effect on him, though. He grinned as if he knew it was coming.

“Wow, you can use magic, too? Great! You’re gonna have to do better than that to hurt me, though.”

He had Magic Resistance along with a high Magic stat. The golden flames even acted as a shield against spells.

“How about this?! Hexagon Tornado!”

Fran cast a high-level Wind spell. The six-sided whirlwind closed in around the Beast King. Wind blades cut anything inside the hexagonal cage. They were fast enough to chop off limbs; goblins would be mincemeat by now.

The Beast King, however, only laughed. As the six-sided whirlwind closed in, he waved his right hand.

Fwoom!

“You can delay your incantations? What is that, Instant Cast? Good, but not

good enough. That ain't enough to even scratch me."

Melee didn't work and magic was ineffective. We were screwed.

"My turn. Ready?"

The Beast King made a gesture and I charged my telekinetic energy. It wasn't clear what the gesture meant, but primordial fear had taken over. This was the first time I had ever experienced true terror. Fran agreed, and accelerated away with magic. Cold sweat ran down her face, but this was the right move.

Golden flames burned the spot where Fran had been standing. If I hadn't held the blast back, and Fran hadn't jumped, we would've been a pile of ash.

"Good instinct! How about this?!"

The Beast King waved his hand again. The golden flame split, turning into a kind of fiery hydra, speeding towards us from all directions. He could even control the flame in precise movements!

"Ugh!" Fran dodged, but they got close enough to blister. The intense heat was terrifying.

"Really? You've got spunk, kid! Try this one on for size!"

"Urgh..."

The flames chased harder and faster. Fran shot off some water spells and barely escaped being burned alive.

"You're doing great, kid! Have some more!"

The Beast King howled with laughter as he added more heads to the flaming hydra. He was close to overwhelming us. We only needed to stop him for a second to heal Zehmet and get the hell out of there...but he seemed unstoppable. He hadn't even moved an inch. The fact that he could chase us down without moving underlined the difference in power. Should we run, or use our trump card? We had to decide.

Fran!

Teacher...we have to use it! Fran wasn't going to leave Zehmet behind.

All right! Time for our ace in the hole!

I'm sure that'll work!

You're right.

The Beast King's lips curled into a feral smile as he saw Fran drop into a crouch. "What's this? Are you getting something ready?"

"Haaaa—"

The Beast King changed his stance for the first time in the fight. He felt Fran's increase in energy and responded in kind. Tensions mounted as they prepared for a battle to the death.

"What do you think you're doing, Your Majesty?!"

And with that, the tension was immediately dispelled. Two figures approached us. The one in front had the frankness of an annoyed parent as he entered the battleground's deadly aura, and I recognized him at once. This was Rosch, the coachman of the Beast King's carriage.

Name: Rosch Age: 37

Race: White Weasel Tribe/White Curse Skunk Class: Hunter Mage Level: 62/99

HP: 556; Magic: 758; Strength: 251; Agility: 539

Skills: Sensitive Sole 4; Dig 6; Stealth 8; Wind Magic 4; Bow Arts 9; Bow Mastery 10; Advanced Bow Mastery 1; Coachman 7; Vigilance 8; Presence Sense 10; Conceal Presence 7; Flexibility 4; Blink 8; Hush 5; Abnormal Status Resistance 4; Everyday Magic 3; Mental Status Resistance 5; Dagger Arts 4; Dagger Mastery 5; Perfumer 8; Jump 6; Climb 5; Venomology 8; Poison Magic 5; Earth Magic 7; Burrow 5; Fire Magic 5; Magic Resistance 3; Mana Sense 7; Nightshade 7; Disarm Trap 6; Trap Sense 8; Lay Trap 4; Spirit Manipulation; Enhanced Olfactory; Enhanced Touch; Mana Manipulation; Enhanced Hearing
Class Skill: Awaken; Curse Strike Titles: Chimera Slayer; Dungeon Conqueror
Equipment: Hades Wood Bow; Dimension Quiver; Blackshade Beast Boots; Shadowplate Gauntlets; Black Stealth Spider Cloak; Bracelet of Dexterity; Bracelet of Storage
A hunter and a competent scout... This Rosch looked like an all-rounder. He was strong, too—about as strong as an A-Rank adventurer. The man put his hands on his waist. It was a childish gesture considering his

age, but it somehow looked natural on him.

“Damn it, Rosch...”

“I take my eyes off you for one second!” Rosch lectured the Beast King. The lean, gray-haired man took a potion out of his pocket and emptied it over Zehmet. It must’ve been a potent one, because Zehmet’s grave wounds immediately started to heal. He was now only half dead instead of nearly dead.

“I can’t believe you would fight a Black Cat... Have you forgotten your mission?!”

“No, look. This girl is friends with Blue Pride for some reason...”

“That is no excuse. You didn’t have to send a blazing inferno after her! You were about to kill her, you muscle-brained dolt!”

“Now now, Rosch,” the second of the new arrivals cut in. It was Royce. “Lord Rig, we have apprehended the members of Blue Pride who are suspected of dealing in the slave trade. The rest have been dealt with in self-defense.”

Wait...what?

They’d captured the members of Blue Pride who were involved in slavery? What was the Beast King playing at?

It was clear the fight was over. Fran still maintained her guard, but her murderous intent was gone. Royce was already tending to Zehmet with some healing spells. This might just be the biggest misunderstanding we’d gotten ourselves into yet.

Fran turned to the Beast King. “What’s going on?”

“You didn’t tell her, did you, Your Majesty?”

“Well...umm...” The Beast King avoided Royce’s gaze and scratched his cheek.

“You picked a fight with her on the spot without trying to explain the circumstances, didn’t you?”

“Urk...” The Beast King bit his lip. He looked like a child in the middle of being scolded.

“Are you hurt, young lady?”

“No...”

“Really now? That’s amazing. And are you involved with Blue Pride?”

Fran looked troubled by the degree of respect Rosch was showing her. “I’m friends with Zehmet. Just him, though. I hate the rest of them.”

“I see. Your Highness?”

“Well, isn’t this an interesting turn of events?”

Rosch and Royce stared at the Beast King until the ruler threw his hands up in defeat.

“Fine! I’m sorry! Gods!”

“Why were you trying to kill Zehmet?”

“He was covering for the rest of his crew.”

“Goodness... Allow me to explain,” said Rosch. “This has been a fundamental misunderstanding. His Majesty the Beast King is apprehending Blue Cats in order to protect Black Cats.”

“What?”

“I knew it...”

The story unfolded from there. Apparently, Beast King Rigdith was opposed to slavery and was, in fact, trying to put a stop to it. That was what had prompted his coup against his own father. He’d killed the previous king to take his place on the throne.

“The old man didn’t put up much of a fight. All the bribes he took made him weak.”

“That man was a politician first and foremost,” Royce agreed, unfazed.

Rigdith had become an adventurer so he could execute his coup. When all the A-Ranks in the beastman country were his to command, it was easy to overthrow the previous king. He got rid of the slavers and spies his father kept, and was now on a mission to set the Black Cats free.

And I didn’t detect a single lie in any of that.

The Beast King really wanted to set the Black Cats free, and he really was in the middle of putting an end to the slave trade. Fran couldn't believe it. "So why were you fighting with Zehmet?" she asked again, still suspicious.

If Zehmet had obeyed Rigdith's orders to hand over the slavers in Blue Pride, he probably would've gotten away with a slap on the wrist. But Blue Pride was like his family, and he couldn't bring himself to betray them, even if they deserved it. He'd pleaded with the Beast King to delay his judgment and give them time to change. Given Rigdith's temper, that was enough to bring them to blows. That was when Fran interrupted.

Now that I thought about it, Rigdith had never actually belittled the Black Cats. He'd said, "Anyway, you seem to be chummy with him. Can't imagine why, what with you being Black and him Blue," and "Such beautiful friendship between a Black Cat and a Blue! It'd be funny if it weren't so twisted!"

Clearly, he'd meant all of that. He might have been provoking Fran, but he genuinely couldn't understand why she was defending Zehmet. As we continued our conversation, his guards brought in the captured members of Blue Pride.

"Curses..." Zehmet lamented, still on his knees.

"Hate me all you want. But I was clear when I told the Blue Cat tribe to put a stop to that slavery stuff. Your men and your sister ignored my explicit orders. You're partly responsible for this."

"I...understand." The Beast King's words only deepened Zehmet's pain. If he'd known about his tribe's underhanded dealings, he could have acted sooner. All of this might have been avoided. "How many...are left?"

"About twenty."

"I...I see." That seemed to sap the life out of Zehmet. Blue Pride had been a large mercenary band. Only twenty survivors? I couldn't imagine his pain.

"The ringleaders, Lord Rig." Gaudartha brought two Blue Cats forward. They were bound and tied, and he held the rope. "These are the two members of the previous Beast King's slave syndicate."

"Senec, Tord...have you been lying to us all?" Zehmet sounded dumbfounded

that the two old cats had been apprehended. He must've trusted these two with his life.

Much as he must have wanted them to deny it, the old men knew that the time for excuses was past. "Hmph...damn Black Cats can't even evolve... What's wrong with putting them to work...?"

"That's right! If anything, we're making their existence worthwhile!"

"But you've always supported us. All the way back since my grandfather's time..."

Senec and Tord had been with Blue Pride since it was a small crew. They'd only held advisory positions of late, but still took advantage of their station to carry out underhanded deals behind the scenes. They'd brought Zehmet up to hate slavery as a cover, so that no one would ever suspect them. The rest of the tribe, like Zehmet's little sister, were taught to see Black Cats as inferior filth. The old schemers were good at hiding their crimes, and knew that even if Zehmet found out, he was far too kind to suspect them.

"But I suppose we went too far in your education. All that idealistic nonsense really got on my nerves." Senec's scoff was aimed at Zehmet as much as Rigdith.

"Big talk for a Tailless," said Fran.

"Don't you dare call me that!"

Tailless? I asked.

Beastmen who have lost their tails.

Tails were a status symbol among long-tailed tribes. You could easily lose yours in the heat of battle, especially if you were trying to flee. The old man Senec lacked his tail. I'd thought he might be hiding it in his pants, but apparently that wasn't something beastmen did.

I guess you learn something new every day.

He glared at Fran. "If it weren't for you Black Cats...my tail would be..."

"Hm?"

"Damn you! Don't look at me! You look just like her...!"

“Her?”

“Her! Kiara! The little brat who took my tail!”

“You know Kiara?”

“Damn right I do! Good riddance to that filthy little wench!”

These old men knew the Black Cat adventurer who’d set off to find the secret to Evolution fifty years ago, who we suspected was kidnapped by the Blue Cats on the previous Beast King’s orders. She must’ve had a run-in with Blue Pride. No wonder they were eager for revenge.

“Good thing the old Beast King dealt with her! She’s probably a slave in some terrible corner of the world! Good riddance! Mwa ha ha!” Senec cackled.

Fran approached him with me in her hand. Watching the old man laugh at the misery of her kind sent her over the edge. She seethed with rage.

Fran, wait!

Senec and Tord probably had information on the slave syndicate, and killing them would probably upset the Beast King.

You can’t kill them!

“Hrmph...”

You can do whatever else you want, but don’t kill them!

Fine.

Fran stopped, although her rage was far from quelled. I had no intention of preventing her from letting it out. She got down to Senec’s level and struck him across the face. The Beast King allowed it, knowing that—painful as it was—she was pulling her punches.

“Aaargh! Aiee! Gaaah!”

“Heal.”

“What? Aaaargh! Ack!”

“Heal.”

“Aieeee! P-please, no mo—*hurk!*”

Senec had no escape. He could only howl for mercy. Fran healed him whenever he started to faint, denying him the pleasure of unconsciousness. She beat him—I counted thirty punches, at least—until Senec’s tears and stomach acid finally moved her to stop.

She worked on Tord next. He immediately pleaded for forgiveness, but it was too late for apologies—fifty years too late.

“Hmph.”

“Aaargh! Oorf! Hurk!”

“Heal.”

Another thirty or so punches later, Fran stopped. Zehmet could only watch as his elders got their just desserts. As deserving as they were of the beatdown, the brutal sight still evoked Zehmet’s pity. When she finally stopped, he sighed in relief.

“Heal.”

“Huh?”

Only problem was, Fran wasn’t done yet.

“Your turn again.”

Fran healed Senec and resumed her punishment. She probably needed a few more laps to calm down.

Zehmet shouted in protest. “W-wait! There’s no need to... Well...I guess after all they’ve done...”

He backed down, remembering their crimes. He might still have tried to stop her if there was plausible deniability, but the accused had admitted quite loudly that they were to blame for Kiara’s disappearance, not to mention the slavery. He knew that Fran was completely justified.

However, someone else stopped her—someone we didn’t expect.

“Calm down, kid. I know you can heal him, but I can’t risk breaking his mind. We still got questions for them both,” said the Beast King.

Unable to ignore him, Fran stopped. Rigdith bent over Senec and threw him a

question. “So, by Kiara, do you mean Old Kiara?”

The question startled the old man. “Old...Kiara?”

“You know: amazing swordswoman, quiet, always looks like she’s chewing on a sour lemon? Uhh...how old is she again, Royce?”

“Inquiring about the master’s age is akin to suicide, Lord Rig.”

“Godo?”

“I hear she turned sixty some years ago,” Gaudartha answered. “She’s probably in her late sixties now.”

“All right. So when did my old man kidnap your Kiara?”

“About fifty years ago,” Fran answered for Senec.

“Do you know how old she was then?”

“Fifteen, I think.” If she were still alive now, she’d be sixty-eight.

“I see... Well, that settles it. The Kiara you’re talking about is our master, Old Kiara.”

Did he just refer to Kiara as his master? Fran rushed towards the Beast King.

“What? What do you mean?” She got up in his face, all her fear gone.

“You know, I’m still royalty. You ever hear of etiquette?”

“Talk.”

“Oh fine, dammit! Just get off.”

“Hm.”

Rigdith was weaker under pressure than he looked. The Beast King scratched his cheek and explained.

When Rigdith was a young lad, he met a Black Cat slave going about her duties in the Beast King’s court. Like every other beastman, he’d looked down on her. All that changed when he turned seven, and an enemy conjurer sneaked into the palace. He’d summoned a terrible monster that killed most of the king’s warriors and soldiers. Gaudartha, a new recruit, was half-dead. Royce, then an apprentice mage, was gravely wounded. Rigdith himself was almost

killed.

The attack had taken place during a war, when the king's finest men were out on the frontlines. There was no one to stop the rampaging Tyrant Sabertooth monster, and all the ways out, even the wells, had been deviously blocked off.

"I was so scared that I thought I was seeing things."

The Black Cat slave, whose only job was waste disposal, had disposed of the menacing monster in seconds. The Tyrant Sabertooth might have been just a cub, but it was still a C-level threat. The Black Cat had fended it off and killed it with a mop. No wonder the young Rigdith had thought he was hallucinating. Anyone would.

Rigdith was even more shocked when he learned that the woman's sole duty was taking out the trash. With her abilities, she could easily have been a conscripted slave, purchased to serve in the army. Her talents were wasted on menial labor. How did she get so strong?

The Black Cat's name was Kiara, and she became his first friend. Because of his status, young Rigdith had no companions, but Kiara didn't seem to care. He decided she should teach him how to fight. Kiara was opposed to this at first, but Rigdith wore her down.

Kiara's spartan discipline made the young Rigdith strong in body and mind. Soon, Gaudartha and Royce became Kiara's secret disciples, as well. The young prince didn't ask them to, but they saw what the Black Cat was capable of with their own eyes. They sheepishly asked her, and she shrugged as she accepted. What was two more pupils to teach?

That said, they had to train in secret. Kiara's only condition was that they not tell a soul—especially among the nobility. She knew there would be trouble if word got out that the prince was being taught by a slave.

Now, standing before us, the three beastmen recalled their days of training in the sewers, reeking of death and corruption.

"Not a day went by that I didn't nearly die."

"Agreed. Master Kiara is a harsh taskmaster."

“They said military training was hell, but it felt like a spa compared to Master’s tutelage.”

Eventually, Rigdith tried to free Kiara from slavery, but she objected, explaining that his father had threatened to kill other Black Cats should she try to escape. The king had only spared her life because of her strength. Mercy had nothing to do with it. If Kiara had fought back, she and other members of the Black Cat tribe would’ve been killed.

Although he couldn’t free her, their time together changed something in young Rigdith’s mind. Rig opposed the widespread discrimination against Black Cats, and began his mission to free them. He started by looking into the secrets of Black Cat Evolution—the inability which was the main cause of their slavery. He didn’t have much luck until his father pulled him aside to let him in on a secret which only the royal family was privy to: the secret of the feud between the reigning royal family and the Black Cats, and how that feud made the Black Cat tribe lose their ability to evolve.

“The old man must’ve thought he was doing me a favor, trying to wake me up. Probably thought it’d get me to stop defending them.”

But it had the complete opposite effect. Even if the powers that be allowed it, Rig knew the way the Black Cats were treated was wrong. In fact, the knowledge only increased his resolve. Arguments between the king and his son grew until they eventually exploded into a full-blown coup. Rigdith emerged the victor.

Teacher?

He’s telling the truth.

The Beast King wasn’t lying, for the most part. What few lies I sensed were in his comments about Kiara being “a lonely old hag who had no sense of common decency.” Rigdith was incredibly roundabout with the people he cared for.

“How is she now?”

“She’s back in the castle. Mostly retired, what with her age. Spends most of her days sleeping, although she still trains the soldiers when she feels up to it.”

“Not a soul in the court ever ridicules the Black Cats for being weak now,” said

Royce.

“You can say that again,” the Beast King agreed.

Fran didn’t know how to respond. She could only stare in stunned silence.

Senec, of all people, was the one who spoke up to object. “I won’t have it! Are you going to eliminate the Blue Cats and replace us out of spite?!”

“Old man, it’s got nothing to do with race. I’m just using the best people for the job. Still, the Black Cats are long overdue for a break.”

“Do you really not understand the position your tribe is in?” Royce said.

There were two major reasons why the Blue Cats might end up like the Black Cats they oppressed. First, the slave trade. Their custom of enslaving Black Cats made it hard for the other tribes to trust them. Unbelievable as it might sound, the Blue Cats used to work for the Black Cats. In fact, it might be the reversal of this very relationship that made the other tribes as wary of them as they were.

Second, there had been a dramatic weakening of the Blue Cats’ abilities. Because of their focus on trade—especially slaves—the Blue Cats had made themselves exempt from fighting and hard labor. They had few warriors, and even fewer evolved. Zehmet was the exception. Most of the Blue Cats today were descendants of the previous Beast King’s slavers. Those who dared oppose the old king had been dealt with. Their entire class of fighters were killed and replaced with slave merchants. The Blue Cats of today hated fighting, and much preferred to resort to underhanded tricks. The other tribes didn’t think much of them.

Fran wasn’t much for politics. She only wanted to make the lives of Black Cats better, and that didn’t necessarily involve making the lives of the Blue Cats worse. Still, she kicked Senec in the face to shut him up.

“I’m just glad to hear Kiara’s still alive,” she told the Beast King. “Can I tell other people about this?”

“Who do you have in mind?”

“Dias and Aurel. They’re her friends. They haven’t stopped worrying about her since they heard she got kidnapped.”

The Beast King nodded. “For real? No wonder they were glaring daggers at me! Sure, go for it. In fact, I’ll tell them for you. I’m going to meet them, anyway.”

“Please.”

“I know you still got questions, but I’m busy the next couple days. Meet me again after you finish the tournament.”

“All right.”

“It’s a date,” said the Beast King. “Now go out there and entertain us, huh? If you make it past the third round, I might actually listen to what you have to say.” He grinned playfully.

Having lost her fear, Fran replied firmly. “Third round? I’m going to win this entire thing.”

“Ha ha ha! You guys hear that? She’s putting you both on notice!”

Royce nodded calmly while Gaudartha gave her a warrior’s smirk. “The enthusiasm of the young does good to one’s heart.”

“Indeed. Don’t think that we’ll go easy on you.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Bwa ha ha ha! You even got a response out of these two! Oh, this is great. Come over after you win and show me your big trophy. Catch you later, Fran.”

The conversation ended on a cheery note as the Beast King took Zehmet inside a tent with the surviving members of Blue Pride. Zehmet was about to turn around to say something, but Rigdith forced him to keep walking. Royce noticed Fran’s worried look.

“We’re going to discuss boring political matters. You can run along now, if you wish.”

Even so, Fran needed to know. “What’s going to happen to Zehmet?”

“Ah. Well, he *is* guilty of going against the absolute word of our monarch, but Lord Rigdith seems interested in him. I am sure nothing bad will befall him.”

“All right.”

Rigdith didn't seem to be the sort to go overboard, and he knew that Zehmet would be a good ally. It wouldn't make sense to execute him.

As we left the Blue Cat encampment, Fran was in high spirits. She was motivated before, but now it had transformed into firm resolve.

We have to get to the third round, now.

"Hm! We have to go all out, Teacher."

The tournament was no longer a hypothetical test.

You're right.

"We'll definitely win!" Fran said under her breath, the flames of resolve quietly roaring inside her.

Chapter 3:

A Fierce Opponent **I**T WAS THE DAY after our strange encounter with the Beast King, and the first match of the second round began while we were standing in the waiting room. Fran would be up in a little under an hour.

Despite everything that happened yesterday, Fran was in perfect condition. In fact, she felt more driven than ever. She was stressed out from having to talk to Blue Cats, but thanks to Rigdith, she was back on her game and more aggressive than ever. Dealing with Blue Cats was a special kind of stress she couldn't work off, even after beating the living daylights out of them. Then again, maybe the atmosphere of the tournament was just getting to her.

I didn't take her aggression to be a bad thing. If anything, I thought she did a good job of converting negative energy into fighting spirit. Still, it would be better to keep her cool if she had to fight several matches in a row. The way she was now, she'd easily make it past the third round.

"Hup! Haa!"

"Woof!"

"Hrmph!"

Fran warmed up by working on evasive maneuvers, swinging me around and having Jet come at her from multiple angles.

You know your match is gonna start soon. Don't tire yourself out.

"Hm."

"Woof."

They nodded, but their game of tag only got faster. The normal human eye could no longer keep up with them. I let them carry on. This only amounted to light footwork for Fran. Soon, a knock came on the door.

"Fran? The second match has just finished. Please get ready."

That was fast. We had only been waiting for thirty minutes. The tournament

official told us that Gaudartha made short work of his opponent. He was definitely the one to beat in our block. He hurried us along to the arena.

“Please make your way into the ring.”

Cruise, the adventurer who beat Old Radule, was our opponent.

Fran, remember this isn't your first time meeting him. Don't say "pleased to meet you".

“Hm?”

Just tell him "it's been a while" or "good to see you again".

“Got it.”

If memory served, Cruise was a C-Rank swordsman. He was more of a leader than a fighter, and his stats showed it. He was probably promoted to C-Rank more for his managerial skills than his fighting prowess. I remembered him being a cheerful man, though one with a weight on his shoulders.

I didn't expect him to look at all like the man waiting for us in the ring. The fierce warrior stared at Fran quietly as she entered. “I didn't think I'd see you here of all places.”

“Hm.”

Is that really Cruise? He's a lot rougher than I remember.

Name: Cruise Riouselles Age: 28

Race: Human Class: Berserker Level: 37/99

HP: 256; Magic: 175; Strength: 183; Agility: 219

Skills: Evil Sense 3; Stealth 4; Evasion 6; Royal Etiquette 2; Frenzy 4; Presence Sense 5; Sword Arts 6; Sword Mastery 8; Self-Defense 4; Command 2; Blink 8; Cold Resistance 4; Poison Resistance 5; Trap Sense 2; Dull Pain; Spirit Manipulation; Health Regeneration; Last Stand Title: Giant Killer; The Upright; Survivor of a Hopeless Battle Equipment: Mad Tiger Fang Longsword; Mithril Full Plate; 100-legged Spider Mantle; Bracelet of Sacrifice; Evasion Ring The handsome face of the young noble was now marked with a scar that ran from the top of his right eye all the way to his cheek. It looked like the claw mark of

a great monster. While he seemed to have retained his vision, the wound was deep.

It wasn't just his looks, either. His Class had changed from Duelist to Berserker, and with it, his Strength and Agility were drastically increased. He was now heavily focused on offense.

Fran finally remembered the young man from Alessa, but everything about him was so different that she doubted herself. "What happened to you?"

"Ha ha ha. Nothing out of the ordinary."

"Doesn't look like it to me."

"I've been doing a lot of thinking since I saw your match with Lady Amanda. I changed my fighting style. I just got a little roughed up trying to perfect it; that's all."

Fran's mock match with Amanda had been intense enough to make anyone rethink their life choices. One look at Cruise's face told me that he'd taken it seriously enough to train almost to the point of death. I thought that was going a little too far, but at least he was trying.

"I don't think I'm as strong as you were back when you challenged Amanda... but I'd like to see how far I've come." Cruise drew his sword, and powerful mana emanated from it. It was definitely an enchanted weapon. The longsword was crafted out of the fangs of a Tyrant Sabertooth. We would have to be careful about the Vibrofang within.

"We're at the same rank now. I need to put up some sort of a fight."

"I'm still going to win. I have my reasons," Fran said as she readied me.

Before, the menacing aura she emitted would've been enough to make him cower. Now, he only smiled as he readied his sword. Cruise had definitely grown stronger psychologically as well as physically.

"And now, a duel between swordsmen! First, the dark horse who eliminated Ulmutt's own elder mage Radule: the C-Rank adventurer, Cruise! Up next, the youngest C-Rank in town, and the youngest combatant in the tournament: the Swordceress Fran! We're in for an exciting fight today, folks!"

Cruise had yet to receive a nickname, but he definitely got some props for beating Radule.

“Third match of the second round...begin!”

“Here I go! Frenzy!”

Cruise opened the fight by immediately increasing his offensive capabilities at the cost of his defense. As its name implied, the skill also threw him into a state of frenzy, making it more difficult for him to make rational decisions. He wanted to be on the offensive from the get-go, even if it did cost him. Against someone as powerful as Fran, a good defense wouldn't do him much good, anyway.

“Haaaaa! Down Break!”

He made a great vertical leap and brought his sword down, his own weight amplified by the force of gravity. His attack was much more refined than it'd been in the dungeon at Alessa.

“Haaa!”

“Too slow,” said Fran.

“Gah!”

She saw through his attack and parried it, then followed up with a counter to his sword arm. If she could disable him, that would net her the win. There were too many holes in Cruise's offense. Frenzy prevented him from properly dodging. He twisted his body, letting his left arm take the hit. Fran cut it off right below the elbow, but Cruise only smiled triumphantly.

“Do you give up?” she asked.

“Hee hee. Of course not. I'm not even left-handed.”

“I thought so.”

It was Fran's turn now.

“Urk!”

I had to applaud him for dodging two of Fran's attacks, but his missing arm shifted his center of gravity. Her third strike cut deep into his side. She carried on her assault, knowing that Cruise was still fully conscious. She twisted me up,

going for his sword arm again, but he managed to activate his skill faster than she could cut.

“Last Stand!”

His body glowed. I checked out his stats and found they were all dramatically increased, but his life force was reduced to a critical state. He’d also acquired Pain Immunity. This was a high-risk skill he could only use at the brink of death!

“Aaaaaargh!”

“Hm!”

Cruise blocked Fran’s attack with what remained of his left arm, and immediately went after her. I felt my blade cut through his bones and nerve endings. The pain would’ve been excruciating without Pain Immunity, but Cruise only let out a menacing roar.

His Bracelet of Sacrifice ensured him a second chance, allowing him to counter his enemy’s offense even when he was at death’s door. Cruise’s strategy involved letting his enemies tear him apart, only to beat them with his exposed bones. It was a good strategy in a tournament, since there was no real threat of dying. Free of that risk, he could punch an entire weight class higher.

“Gah!”

“Too slow.”

Unfortunately, Fran saw through it. She redirected his attack by deflecting the flat of his sword with the back of her hand. Cruise certainly had grown stronger, and had developed a new fighting style to prove it. But Fran hadn’t been slacking off, either. She wasn’t going to pull her punches just because Cruise was willing to put his life on the line. She threw him completely off balance, taking away his only chance at avoiding her kick.

“Hngh!”

Fran’s high kick took the wind out of him and sent him flying. He was still in the arena when he landed, but he wasn’t getting back up. Even if he couldn’t feel pain, he was out cold.

“And it’s over! Fran the Swordceress takes the win and remains the true dark

horse of the tournament!”

Cruise had been the favorite to win the match—he was the senior C-Rank, after all. He had beaten Radule, too.

“That’s the second time Cruise put his life on the line, but it didn’t work this time!”

After fighting Cruise, we got seats to watch the rest of the fights.

This is the last time we can watch Colbert fight before facing him. I hope whoever he’s fighting can last a few minutes.

“Hm.”

People around us were staring at Fran, even though she had pulled down her hood. Still, no one dared to talk to her.

“Woof.”

If nothing else, Jet was at her feet, glaring at everyone around us. I had given him specific instructions to be our guard dog today, and he was doing a great job of it.

“We now come to the fourth match of the second round! The eldest son of Baron Stoneriver, he learned the way of the lance from his father and is no stranger to the battlefield: Hilden Stoneriver!”

Colbert’s opponent wasn’t an adventurer, but he sounded like a famous knight. A figure walked out, spear in hand, looking very much like a knight from the Middle Ages. His armor certainly had an aristocratic look to it, but underneath was a thickly muscled body decorated with scars. Hilden Stoneriver looked more bandit than noble. His eyes had the look of a predator who had just spotted its prey.

Apparently, he was twenty-three years old. That couldn’t be right. He had to be in his late thirties, at least. He exuded an air of confidence which bordered on arrogance. He had probably never lost a battle in his life. Hilden eyed Colbert, measuring him up and looking down on him at the same time.

“So you’re the famous adventurer?”

“Our commentator seems to think so.”

“I don’t remember giving you permission to speak, low rank.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t think to ask.”

“This is the problem with you damn adventurers...”

Hilden was an arrogant aristocrat through and through. Colbert impressed me by not snapping back. No wonder he made it to B-Rank.

“I’ll beat you today, and I’ll show everyone that an adventurer is nothing more than an amateur in the face of a real knight!”

Colbert kept his peace, but raised his eyebrows at the challenge. He was the clear winner when it came to stat sheets, but did Hilden have an ace hidden up his sleeve? I hoped this would be an interesting match.

“Taste the steel of my lance!” Hilden spun his spear. His heavy weapon could be used both to pierce and to slice. It was really quite intimidating. “Raaargh!”

He opened the match by dashing towards Colbert. He wanted to bring the fight to a close with a single stab. His weapon gave him better reach compared to the bare-handed fighter, who didn’t even have anything to block with. He was confident that whatever Colbert had could be easily overpowered by the sheer weight of his lance. He swung his great spear at Colbert’s side, and a swoosh of air rang through the stadium, but that was the only thing his spear cut.

“Tch! Yaaargh!”

“Hah. That’s a mighty sharp point you got there.”

“Hurrgh!”

“Come on, you’ve almost got me.”

After Colbert dodged his first attack, Hilden intensified his assault. His rapid stabs were powerful and violent, and I could easily see him perforating an ogre. But the crowd went wild when Colbert dodged Hilden’s stabs with a single step. You would think that Colbert was pressured into playing a defensive game, but you would be wrong.

Colbert was still completely calm, while Hilden looked more frantic with each missed strike. As stuck-up as the aristocrat spearman was, he knew that he was

outmatched. Understanding this, Hilden shouted with rage.

“Aaaargh! You damned adventurer!”

“Huff.”

“What?!”

Hilden brought his spear down on Colbert’s head, but his frustration made him easier to read. Colbert blocked the tip of his spear with his right elbow. He didn’t even need to dodge to begin with. Their difference in ability was like the difference between an adult and a child. Colbert used the momentum of Hilden’s spear to drop into a fighting stance. The knight had nowhere to run.

“Doesn’t matter if you’re a knight or an adventurer. Strong is strong,” Colbert stated before driving his fist right into Hilden’s solar plexus.

“Oomph!”

The punch sent the larger man flying across the arena with a loud *thwomp*. Impressive, considering that Hilden was decked out in full plate armor. The scene was familiar to us. We did it all the time.

“Get stronger before you start talking trash, punk.”

“Urk...”

Colbert won the match with a ring-out and a knockout.

He really is strong.

Yeah. Fast, too.

Aside from that, he fought like an orthodox martial artist.

He focused on dodging his opponent’s attacks instead of blocking them, and exploited the gaps in their defense with his fists. Our main problem was going to be figuring out a way past his evasion.

Amanda was up next.

“She has annihilated all her opponents with a single stroke so far. Will Amanda the Hariti do it again?! Her challenger is a hulking mass! His body is his introduction! The C-Rank with the strength of a B-Rank: Wicked Arm Shin!”

The crowd applauded the giant of a man. Gaudartha was big, but Wicked Arm managed to be even larger. At over three meters tall with muscles bulging all over his body, he looked more ogre than human. He might actually have been, too, since he was apparently a half-beast. Perhaps one of his parents was a rhino beastman like Gaudartha. As his nickname suggested, his arms were as thick as tree trunks.

“Bwa ha ha ha! Puny woman. I can crush you with my bare hands!”

“Are you saying you want to touch me? What a nasty thing to say.”

“Hah! That’s what they all say! They all call me big and slow! Well, I’m big, but I’m a lot of other stuff, too!”

Shin wasn’t exaggerating. He had high HP and Defense and was decked out with Harden, Regenerate, and Rush—there was no stopping him once he made his charge. Shin could rush his opponent, knock them down, and bring them to a swift end with his gigantic hammer. I couldn’t imagine how much that hammer weighed. The groove it left as he pulled it off the ground was as deep as a ditch. Even an A-Rank would have trouble dodging that, but Amanda maintained her calm smile.

“Well, you sure sound confident.”

“Har har! I can’t wait to hear your screams! All the women I’ve fought squeal good when I crush them!”

“Ugh...why do I keep getting matched up with weirdos...?” Amanda groaned as she readied her whip.

She maintained her cool, but a storm was building up behind her words. I didn’t think any woman could keep her cool for long after being mocked like that.

The commentator signaled for the start of the match. “Begin!”

“Ha ha ha! You think that tiny whip can penetrate my thick muscles?!”

Shwoop! Thwack! Poof!

“Wha?”

Shin was dumbfounded. He looked at his hands, wondering where his giant

hammer had gone. A heavy thud came from the stands followed by the panicked screams of the audience. Amanda had sent the hammer flying right into the wall. A single crack of her whip was enough to fling it all that way! I knew Amanda was good, but this was ridiculous. Then again, she was able to deal significant damage to the giant Linford back in Bulbola, so this wasn't even close to her full strength.

“Wh-wha—”

“Now, let's see how long you last.” As Shin was still processing what had happened, Amanda cracked her whip.

“Gah! Ack! Oof!”

“Come on, now!”

Ten seconds passed, and a bloodied mass of meat lay twitching in the center of the arena. Amanda hadn't moved an inch. She was whipping up a Mach Five storm. Shin had no way of escaping or blocking her lashes. He was forced to take all of them head on.

“I guess you really are big and slow.”

Amanda was strong. That was not news.

Amanda's so good!

She is.

The match lit a fire in Fran's heart, but considering her love for battle, it only added fuel to the blaze. The round continued to the final match of the day.

It's between Elza and a guy named Jakusho.

Amanda hadn't won her block yet. Elza was still in play. Now there was a fight we wouldn't miss.

“Our next contender comes all the way from the far eastern continent of Capur! Hailing from the Hagane archipelago, a swordsman who has dedicated his life to battle: Jakusho!”

Hagane archipelago? I'd never heard of it. Jakusho looked like a samurai. I had seen people clothe themselves with something like a hakama, but Jakusho

looked like a ronin right out of a Kurosawa Akira film. He was thin-faced, wearing a long sleeved haori over his shoulders. The black haori looked quite dashing paired with the light blue kimono underneath.

He's using an actual katana, too. That 500 Attack value is no joke.

His blade was still in its sheath at his waist. It wasn't enchanted, but its power suggested that it was made by a master swordsmith.

"He cut his opponent's sword in two during the first round. Can he do it again?! He'll be up against Ulmutt's own perfect storm: the Maelstrom, Elza!"

Elza the Maelstrom? That was her nickname? How fitting.

"Well, aren't you a handsome young man," Elza remarked.

"...?"

"You're going to burn me up with that fiery stare of yours."

"E-excuse me for asking, but...you are a woman, yes?"

"How rude! How could you ask that of a fair lady?"

"I-I apologize..."

Jakusho sounded like a decent fellow. The poor guy probably didn't know what to think, let alone focus on. Still, he proved his mettle when the match started. He discarded all confusion and treated Elza like any other foe, drawing his blade, which was as sharp as his battle aura.

"Prepare yourself!" he said.

"Oh, I'm ready any time you are!"

"Ergh!"

Well, maybe he hadn't completely gotten used to Elza yet.

"Yeeeaargh!"

His fighting stance reminded me of the Satsuma Jigen-ryu I'd seen in comic books. The people here probably had a different name for it, but that was the image that came to my mind. Jakusho kicked the ground and charged forward, bringing his sword down on Elza. The samurai had become one with his blade.

Even Elza didn't have time to react. The crowd gasped with anticipation as Jakusho's sword buried itself into her shoulder, but Elza proved herself to be one of Ulmutt's finest. The blade should've cut her in half, so everyone was shocked to find that it stopped midway through her collarbone.

"What...!"

"Tee hee. Gotcha!"

That was the result of a perfectly timed Barrier and Steel Body, but that wasn't all. She also braced her muscles, tightening her body's hold on Jakusho's sword. Try as he might, the samurai couldn't pull the blade out of Elza's body. Elza pulled him into a submission hold, and Jakusho immediately surrendered. Elza's enjoyment was on full display for the audience to see. The contrast between Jakusho's drained look and Elza's revitalized appearance was a terrifying sight.

Best to keep your distance if you have to go up against her.

Hm. She's strong.

Sure, but...uhh, never mind. Just don't let her grab you.

"Hm!"

Two days after Fran fought Cruise, the third round of the tournament was upon us. As expected, Fran was going up against Colbert.

Despite predicting our opponent, I was quite nervous, but Fran seemed calm. I'd taught her some meditation exercises, and she took to them immediately. I was no expert, but I knew what it was supposed to look like. Sit on the floor, close your eyes, focus on your breathing. She had been sitting in this meditative state for well over ten minutes.

"Zzz..."

Wake up!

"Bwuh!"

Look, if you're going to sleep, you might as well lie down.

"Didn't mean to."

At least she wasn't nervous. Still, Gaudartha sure was taking his time. Usually he'd be done by now, and an attendant would be telling Fran to get ready, but it was another five minutes before Fran got her summons.

"Fran, please make your way to the arena."

"Hm!" Fran fluffed Jet for good luck and got up. She grinned as she left the room. "Let's do this."

She wasn't overly tense or overly relaxed. Perfect.

Teacher, we have to give it our all today.

Should I help from the start?

Hm. I want to finish the match as quick as possible.

The request was unusual for Fran. She wanted to skip the pleasantries of gauging her opponent and go right on the offensive. I agreed with her. Battle junkies tended to watch the opponent's movements to gauge their ability. It allowed them to understand what their foe was capable of, but it came at the cost of their defense.

Colbert was likely to engage in this same practice. Fran would gladly exploit that for the sake of a formal audience with the Beast King. She had no more reason to hide from Rigdith. He wouldn't mind her showing how strong she really was.

We walked down the familiar hallway and entered the arena. The crowd greeted Fran with more intense applause this time. I finally understood what people meant when they said an atmosphere was electric.

"The dark horse enters the arena. After claiming victory in the previous two rounds, will she continue her blaze of glory?! The rising superstar: Black Cat Fran!"

Fran was the first to enter the ring. The roar of the crowd echoed through the stadium. I could pick out a few distinct voices. Some of them were angry about money they'd lost on the first two matches. Even more cheered her on, having supported her from the start. Then there was the loud applause of her fellow adventurers.

The last group surprised me, but it made sense when I saw that they were Elza's underlings. They probably got direct orders to support her. But the sight of macho adventurers cheering on a little girl was still odd, and the people around them watched with slightly disturbed looks.

Fran smiled back, clearly not minding the attention. The audience cheered at her display of cuteness. Why yes, she was cute indeed, thank you very much.

The crowd greeted her challenger with as much fervor as they had Fran.

"And now, the Swordceress' challenger. He made a name for himself beating things up with his bare hands: Steelclaw Colbert!"

I checked Colbert's stats again and found that they hadn't changed from the last time we met. Of course, part of it might be concealed under the Dimitris Seal, and we couldn't rule out the possibility of Fake Identity, either. We had to be on our guard.

"Hey, little lady," he said. "Been expecting you."

"Hm. You too."

"Ha ha ha. I can't go around losing to the lower ranks. I'm a B-Rank, remember?"

"Do I count as lower rank?"

"Not really, I don't think... Still, I won't lose to you on principle."

"Agreed. I need to win this, too."

"Guess we're in the same boat."

Sparks flew from their stares. While it wasn't enough to create a fireworks display, their fighting spirit was heavy enough to quiet down the raucous crowd. They watched with bated breath as Fran and Colbert took their places.

"Second match of the third round. Begin!"

"Here we go..."

As we predicted, Colbert dropped into a defensive stance and waited for Fran to make the first move. He was confident that she would open the match with measured strikes here and there, but we had every intention of kicking right

into high gear. No hard feelings, Colbert!

Stone Wall! Fire Wall! Wind Wall!

I cast three spells immediately. The walls of stone, fire, and wind formed a cramped tunnel around Fran and Colbert.

“Tch!” He reacted immediately and broke through the ceiling, but I had anticipated that.

“Inferno Burst.”

Inferno Burst.

We both cast a flame spell this time. Fire filled the tunnel and chased after Colbert as he made his escape. The intense heat was already melting the stone walls, but the inner reinforcement of fire and wind prevented the tunnel from collapsing. This attack served a two-pronged purpose: It kept Colbert from escaping, and focused the flames into a backdraft. His escape path was already consumed by bright red fire.

We kept the pressure on. We knew that our opener wasn’t enough to incapacitate the B-Rank adventurer.

“Wind Bullet!”

Stone Bullet!

Since Fran and I couldn’t see Colbert through the flame and smoke, we aimed for his aura. The shots of stone and wind would confirm his location, and then we could begin our real attack.

“Haaa!”

Let’s go!

I couldn’t remember the last time I used Telekinetic Catapult. While I couldn’t reach maximum velocity in the short tunnel, it would be enough to deal significant damage...or so I thought.

“Nryaaaa!”

Whoa!

Just as I was about to lodge myself in his trunk, Colbert punched the flat of my

blade, deflecting me. It threw off my trajectory, and for a moment I was convinced he had knocked me into the day after tomorrow. He blocked Telekinetic Catapult—the finishing move of our opening combo—with ease. Colbert was burnt in some places, but the spells didn't seem to have slowed him down.

He was strong. We needed to end this fight before he got serious.

I used a wind spell to adjust my trajectory, and Transmogrified my blade into a spiked ball. I used Elemental Blade, too—Thunder element.

“Whaaat?!” Colbert shouted.

He wasn't expecting a sword to come to a full stop and turn into a spiked ball of electricity. How much Defense did he have?! My spikes could easily penetrate steel, but Colbert's leather armor was not having it. Fortunately, the thunder element gave my blade a shocking quality.

“A-a-a-a-a-a!” Colbert screamed as electricity coursed through his body. Lightning still worked.

“Stun Bolt!” Fran followed up with another thunder spell. Good! Colbert was glowing and shedding blue sparks.

“Urgh...!”

“Time to end this!” Fran shouted. “Gale Hazard!”

She used a wind spell, intent on taking the win while Colbert was at a safe distance. If we learned anything from the Cruise fight, it was that fighters had an insane tendency to make comebacks. The spell blew Colbert a good twenty meters, and he was on trajectory to hit the stands.

Fran kept watch, waiting for the impact. If Colbert somehow changed directions, she would force him back with another spell. We stayed on our guard...

“Hrmph.”

Did he...use a Return Feather?

Colbert was gone. That much was clear, but where was he? I looked around, but couldn't spot him anywhere.

“Up.”

Above?!

Colbert was in the air above the ring. He didn't have to worry about getting knocked out from up there, and he could watch all of his opponent's movements. It was a good spot to make a tactical retreat, and a good use of a disposable item. That said, it opened him up to attack as he fell.

“Hm!”

Fran wasted no time in exploiting Colbert's descent and shot off some wind spells, focusing on speed and range instead of raw damage. Meanwhile, I launched some flame spells to confuse him. The fire would end the match if it landed. Our combination should have knocked him out of the air, and we hoped it would knock him outside the ring, but Colbert crushed our expectations. He punched our spells out of the air, dissipating them into energy.

He's charged his fists with mana!

Colbert accelerated down towards Fran, probably with a movement skill like Air Hop.

“Haaaa! Raaagh!”

He punched the air, forming waves of impact that shot towards us. While each blast was relatively weak, there were many of them, and Fran prepared herself by casting a wide-area barrier.

Our blast of flame was enough to block Colbert's shockwaves, but he saw it coming. He was trying to stop Fran for long enough that he could recover.

He landed safely and stared at Fran as he dropped into an impenetrable stance. Fran met his gaze with equal intensity.

“Phew,” he said. “That was dirty.”

“I saw an opening and I took advantage. That was all.”

“I guess you did. I didn't expect you to be such a good mage. Honestly, I'm kind of shocked that you hid it from me for so long.”

“I could say the same for you. You have more mana now?”

Fran was right. Colbert did have a higher Magic rating than before.

Name: Colbert Age: 38

Race: Human Class: Steel Fist Level: 41/99

HP: 381/508; Magic: 330/452; Strength: 299; Agility: 253

Skills: Disassemble 4; Martial Arts 6; Martial Arts Mastery 6; Danger Sense 3; Advanced Punch Mastery 2; Punch Arts 9; Punch Mastery 10; Breath Control: Harden 4; Brute Force 8; Blink 9; Swim 4; Ocean Resistance 2; Throw 4; Dimitris Combat Arts 8; Dimitris Combat Mastery 8; Physical Barrier 4; Mana Thruster 5; Sleep Resistance 3; Paralysis Resistance 4; Cooking 3; Hawkeye; Beast Killer; Split Thinking; Spirit Manipulation Class Skill: Steel Fist Titles: Bear Killer; Tiger Killer Equipment: Water Dragon Leather Gloves; Aged Water Tiger Gi; Aged Water Tiger Shoes; Red Maw Bear Bandanna; Red Maw Bear Cloak; Bracelet of Pain Resistance; Bracelet of Physical Resistance.

Was this his unleashed state? His stats were greatly increased, and he'd gained the skills Dimitris Combat, Physical Barrier, Mana Thruster, and Split Thinking. Brute Force and Blink were at higher levels, and the boost in Colbert's stats was nothing to scoff at, either. A hundred points for HP and Magic, and fifty for both Strength and Agility. His Dimitris Combat skills were on display now. Colbert felt like a completely different person.

Careful. He took off his seal.

"You took off your seal?"

"So you noticed."

Colbert let out a resigned sigh. Taking off the Dimitris seal for personal gain was forbidden. The act might be enough to get him expelled from his school. I should press him on that point.

Fran, repeat after me.

"Hm."

We could take advantage of this opening.

"Won't you get expelled for removing your seal for personal gain?"

“It’s happened to others in the past, yeah.”

“So are you going to get expelled, too?”

“Maybe.” Colbert frowned.

“Why did you do it, then?”

Fran’s question made him grimace. He shook his head. “I might get expelled, yes. But there’s something more important than that!” Colbert shouted as he returned to his stance.

“Like what?”

“Simple. The honor of the Dimitris Combat School!” he declared confidently.

But “honor,” you say?

“Will unleashing your full power against a child bring honor to the school?”

That got him. “I...”

“Well?”

“Sorry,” he said. “I was getting ahead of myself.”

“You were.”

“Ugh...you’re right. I have no business spouting idealistic nonsense now.” The conversation took a somber turn. I might have gone too far. “I’m sorry. I admit that I’m doing this for my own selfish reasons. I won’t let my beloved Dimitris style be defeated by a C-Rank. I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself. The Dimitris Combat School is the strongest in the world.”

Colbert’s mana wrapped around his body. Its sheer density made it as thick as full plate armor.

“I could never forgive myself if people thought ill of the Dimitris style! I’ll risk excommunication if I have to!”

Colbert was determined to prove the strength of his school. I had to give him props for it. But his declaration only steeled Fran’s resolve.

“I see.”

Fran was going to enjoy this match to the fullest now. She didn’t much care

about winning as much as she loved battling a strong opponent.

“Gale Hazard!”

Fran cast another area-of-effect spell to slow him down, then charged right at him. Colbert was stronger now, but his Advanced Punch Mastery was still the same. Fran had the upper hand in a straight melee. The only thing we had to look out for was his Dimitris Combat skill. I kept an eye open as Fran rushed in...

“Haaaa!”

“Dimitris Combat Arts! Asura!”

“Ugh!”

Two arms emerged from each of Colbert’s shoulders, stopping Fran’s attack. He was able to manipulate this condensed mana like his own limbs, making him the spitting image of the six-limbed god who was his attack’s namesake. His magic arms were strong...strong enough even to stop me with my Elemental Blade.

“Grah!”

“Urk!”

Colbert’s counterpunch blew Fran away. Like Cruise, he could block and attack at the same time, but Colbert was far more dangerous. Fran managed to block in time, but I took a huge hit to my durability. Colbert’s punch would’ve severely injured Fran if she had taken a direct hit.

“Let’s go!”

“Haaa!”

Fran handled her sword better than Colbert did his hands, but he had six of them now. The arms snaked about, blocking Fran’s strikes as they came. What was worse, although Fran managed to damage his mana arms, Colbert could repair them instantly. They were the perfect shield.

The perfect shield was also the perfect weapon. Unlike human hands, they didn’t follow the laws of physics, and could stretch and make impossible strikes from odd angles. Colbert’s Advanced Punch Mastery only multiplied this effect. He was used to attacking with his bare hands, and now he had more hands to

use.

“Raaah!”

“Urgh!”

The mana arms finally caught up and punched right through Fran’s lungs.

Greater Heal!

The spell instantly healed her injury, but she was still reeling. Colbert exploited this gap in her defense and rushed her with a flurry of blows. It didn’t take long for an even larger gap to form.

“I’ve got you now!”

What?!

Colbert’s mana hand engulfed me. It wrapped tight around my blade and refused to let go. I managed to Telekinesis my way out, but he was only trying to stop me for a second. Exploiting the tiny gaps in his opponent’s defense was Colbert’s game plan.

Fran managed to avoid his blows, but she was clearly hurting. Elza said that the Dimitris Style used Spirit energy to destroy an opponent’s insides with some kind of reverberation. All of Colbert’s attacks had this effect. Fran was still getting hurt even when she blocked his blows. Her barrier was doing its best, but it wasn’t quite enough. It wouldn’t take long for her to collapse.

Fran, Colbert’s attacks aren’t your normal physical attacks. I’m putting points into Physical Resistance!

Hm. Got it!

I put eighteen points into Physical Resistance. It was enough to rank me up. Our strategy involved me saving up a sizable amount of EP that I could distribute during the fight. It was a hard gamble, but it allowed us to adapt to whatever opponent we were up against.

Physical Resistance is at max level. Skill has been upgraded to Physical Immunity.

Well, I got the Immunity skill...but I could worry about that later. This would

give us the upper hand.

Go, Fran!

“Hm!”

“What the—?!”

Colbert was shocked as Fran charged right into him. His attacks had no effect on her. She abandoned all attempts at defense in her mad dash. It seemed like a reckless maneuver, but Fran took all of Colbert’s blows head-on without suffering damage. The skill made her look invincible, but I was panicking the entire time.

Lumina was right! Physical Immunity is a huge drain!

The slightest hit took a thousand points of my mana. The Immunity skill was powerful, but it came at a high cost. Lumina had warned us about its double-edged nature a few days ago...

“Teacher, while your ability to absorb skills is powerful, there is something you need to be wary of.”

What do you mean?

“The Immunity skills, for example. Very few monsters possess these skills, but you must be careful about absorbing them.”

“Why?”

“Using them consumes a large amount of mana. They are also difficult to manage, since they never turn off. You could end up draining your entire pool if you fight the wrong enemy.”

Basically, if you used Flame Immunity in a volcano, you’d drain all your mana in a second. Among the Immunities, Lumina warned us about Physical Immunity in particular. The skill naturally occurred in ghost-and spirit-type monsters, so she couldn’t imagine what would happen if a creature with a physical body came to possess it. Just walking might be enough to trigger it.

Lumina also warned us about skills that nullified the effects. The gods had balanced this world so that there were skills which could overwhelm Immunity. Skills with the word Penetrate—or Godflame, which the gods themselves

possessed—were capable of this. The Flame Sword Ignis had the Godflame skill, and there were records of it completely burning those with Flame Immunity to cinders. The Beast King's Class Skill, Golden Flame of Extinction, was likely also of this kind.

“You’ve grown stronger through my training. But remember there are people stronger than you out in the world, Fran.”

“Hm.”

“And do not let your guard down just because you have an Immunity skill.”

“Got it.”

Fortunately, we had the ability to equip and unequip skills as we pleased. The Immunity skills would make a fine addition to our arsenal, as long as we used them at the right time and place.

But I’m definitely not going to unequip it when fighting Colbert!

I used Absolute Barrier, just in case. It was a high-level skill I got from maxing out both Mana Barrier and Physical Barrier. I thought it would nullify all attacks, but apparently it could only block magical and physical attacks. It decreased the damage of Colbert’s strikes, though, further reducing the maintenance cost of Physical Immunity. But I couldn’t say that things were going in our favor.

Fran, we need to finish this, quick!

“Hm!”

Fran held me above her head, looking to end the fight in one strike. Her stance left a hole in her defense, which Colbert was eager to exploit.

“Dimitris Combat Ultimate! Internal Rupture!”

Colbert charged his mana arm and corkscrewed it toward Fran’s torso. It landed, but she didn’t even wince.

“Damn it! How did that not work?!”

The attack was nullified, all right, but only at the cost of almost a thousand mana. I couldn’t imagine the damage the corkscrew would’ve inflicted without Physical Immunity. Colbert really was worth his salt, but now we were prepared

to go on the counterattack!

“Hm!”

Fran jumped high into the air and prepared her strongest attack. She used Elemental Blade and added it to mine. Then she readied a Pressurized Quickdraw imbued with Vibroblade, Venomfang, and Increase Weight. Her form was perfect because of Sword King Mastery, and her signature move was deadlier than ever.

Colbert could easily dodge such a telegraphed vertical, of course, but I wasn't going to let him. I locked him in place with Telekinesis and Wind Magic. My hold wouldn't last long, but Fran only needed a second. Colbert crossed his mana arms in front of him to form a shield...

“Haaaa!”

“Gaaaargh!”

But Fran cut through all of them. She cut through his physical arms as well, and dragged me through all the way from his left shoulder to his waist. Although she didn't manage to cut his physical arms off entirely, the damage to his lungs was apparent. My flaming blade singed his organs, filling the air with the smell of cooked flesh. His lungs were pretty much dust.

Still, we couldn't afford to let our guard down. Colbert was strong, and I wouldn't be surprised if he had a trick or two that allowed him to come back from the brink of death. Our mana reserves were almost dried up.

Keep going, Fran!

“Hm!”

She shifted me to her waist and launched a horizontal slash with the force of Pressurized Quickdraw. Shockingly, Colbert still attempted to dodge. He focused his mana and stretched out his phantom arms to strike back. Our mana would be finished if we nullified this attack. I elongated my blade. We had to end this fight right now!

“That's not going to—”

You're not getting away!

“Aaagh!”

I felt my blade cut through Colbert’s trunk just as his mana arms reached Fran. His belly opened up, spraying blood all over her face. The mana arms dissipated as their master lost his concentration.

“Dammit...” Colbert gurgled as he collapsed to his knees.

He keeled over, absolutely still. Blood rushed from the open wounds, flooding the arena with red. His insides, in their heavily poisoned state, followed suit. It was an awful sight, and we couldn’t minister to him since we had expended the last of our mana in our final attack. Fortunately, the guild was there to intervene and immediately tended to his wounds. The Healing Mages were old pros, curing the poison with magic and liberally applying healing potions over his fatal injuries. Fran was announced as the winner, and the crowd exploded with applause.

“And she does it again! What a finish! Swordceress Fran pulls through! The dark horse of the tournament seems unstoppable! Will Diamond Wall Gaudartha stop her winning streak?! Tune in next time!”

She threw one last glance at Colbert before leaving the ring.

Will he be okay?

Don’t worry. He’s in good hands.

Hm. Good. I want to fight him again someday.

That was her only reason for worrying. B-Rank he might be, but I didn’t think Colbert would be able to shake this off so quickly.

We decided to check in on him, and asked the tournament attendant where the infirmary was. Colbert was lying in bed when we came in. The Healing Mages had done their jobs, but he still needed to recover.

“How are you feeling?”

“Little lady...you killed me out there.”

“It was either you or me.”

“Fair enough. Can’t believe I lost after taking off the seal...ugh!” Colbert held

his head in pain.

“You sure you’re all right?”

“Yeah...I just went a little crazy. But this always happens after I use Asura.”

That was the skill which sprouted his mana arms. The skill probably improved his reaction time as well as improving his sight. His heightened senses allowed him to cope with Fran’s Sword King Mastery. The way he manipulated the mana arms would’ve taken up a lot of brain power. No wonder he was getting headaches.

“You’re strong. Strongest I’ve ever fought.”

“Thanks.”

“You’ll be up against an absolute beast next, but I think you can win.”

“Of course.”

Colbert had Gaudartha in mind. Fran responded with a grin that said she couldn’t wait. A normal person would think her crazy, but Colbert only chuckled. “That’s the spirit.”

“Hm!”

They chatted for a while, and Fran eventually left. She didn’t want to place undue stress on Colbert while he was still recovering. As she walked away from the infirmary, I could make out his faint cries.

“No! I definitely got carried away! Am I gonna get kicked out of Dimitris...? Knowing Master, I’m definitely getting expelled...!”

I could picture him holding his head in distress. The warrior in him wanted to spare Fran the sight of his embarrassment. I chose to pretend I hadn’t heard that.

All the best, buddy.

“Hm?”

Nothing. Let’s get going.

We left the infirmary and headed for the seats. We could learn a thing or two from the fights today, assuming we beat Gaudartha tomorrow. There were six

matches left to go. The first of them was already wrapping up. Yet again, Amanda made quick work of her competition.

“I wish we could’ve seen it.”

Well, you know Amanda. Elza’s up next.

She would be fighting a C-Rank adventurer—a technically proficient lancer. I was looking forward to this one. The seats were completely filled, though... Could we just make our own seat with Earth Magic? As I weighed our options, a voice called out to Fran.

“Hey, are you the Swordceress?” a middle-aged man asked.

“Hm?”

The man had a shish kebab in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other—the picture of a sports fan enjoying the show. Although Fran had pulled down her hood, he was sitting and could still see her face. That was how he recognized her.

“I-It is you! Are you here to watch the other fights?”

“Hm.”

“Well, in that case, feel free to take my seat!”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course! Your wins have made me a lot of money. Enough that I don’t have to work for the rest of the month!”

That was good to hear. Apparently, the man had been betting on Fran since round one. Maybe it was just in case Fran caused an upset, but the fact remained that he had supported her since the beginning. That was nice of him.

“Just shake my hand and we’ll call it even. I can’t wait to tell the boys!”

“Sure.”

“I’ll keep rooting for you. Good luck!”

“Hm.”

And that was how Fran legally secured a seat for herself. She shook the man’s

hand and he left looking like a million bucks. He would still watch the fight, albeit standing.

Good for us.

“Hm.”

Fran sat down just as Elza’s match began. In line with what we’d heard about him, Elza’s opponent was agile. He wasn’t fast enough to create a gap in Elza’s defense, but he chipped away with his spear regardless. Unfortunately, chipping damage wasn’t going to work against Elza’s rock-hard defense. Elza charged at the spearman without so much as pausing to feign pain.

The lancer managed to dodge, but he saw the great hole the blow left behind. The sight of it was enough to chill his blood. His movements grew more awkward after that. He escaped unscathed, but one wrong move would be the end of him. We’d also had battles where this was the case, but this match was looking particularly grim. The lancer needed to be more aggressive to have any chance of winning, but Elza’s terrible mace kept him away.

Even so, the lancer made up his mind and leaped toward Elza. He slipped past the awful mace and launched multiple strikes in the hopes of breaking Elza’s balance. The crowd roared with anticipation as the lancer’s spinning spear made contact with Elza’s bare chest, but her skin stopped the spear dead in its path. As with the fight with Jakusho, it was like plate armor. The fight came to a dreary end after that. Elza pulled the lancer into a chokehold, and the spearman could only flop about as the last of his will was strangled out. Elza enjoyed his surrender even more than Jakusho’s.

We don’t want to end up in that position.

“But we can deal a lot of damage up close.”

Sure, but...

Was I going to let Elza put Fran in a chokehold? Absolutely not.

We have to avoid close quarters at all cost. Especially her ground game.

“Hm. Very dangerous.”

The rest of the fights weren’t worth watching—they ended too fast to be

useful. Forlund took the fourth match in about five seconds. Even the crowd complained about that. Phillip Christon made a good showing in the fifth match, but he didn't show us anything we hadn't seen in Bulbola. He hit hard, fast, and strong, and his defense was difficult to penetrate. As for the sixth and seventh matches, Phelms and Royce fought for barely more than a minute. We only caught a glimpse of their full power, but that was enough to know how strong they were.

The third round was filled with powerful combatants. A-Rank adventurers really were more terrifying than the monsters and criminals they hunted down.

We'll be going up against that kind of monster tomorrow.

"We'll win."

I have every intention of it.

The day's tournament came to a close, but instead of returning to our inn, we went to the dungeon to train. We had just acquired some new skills, and we wanted to prepare for our fight against Gaudartha.

It's taking up a lot of mana.

Nullifying attacks from weak monsters with Physical Immunity took anywhere from a hundred to two hundred mana per hit. Walking about didn't trigger it, but the motions of battle were enough to be a significant drain, even without taking any hits. Anything from killing a monster to blocking its attacks triggered it. Half my mana was gone by the time I'd even noticed.

The skill was strong, though, that was for sure. Unlike Barrier skills, Physical Immunity nullified the shock and inertia of an attack. Even a direct hit from a giant ogre didn't faze Fran. It allowed her to power through even the deftest of feints. The skill nullified everything from the sharp edge of a sword to the crushing weight of a hammer. Barrier would be our mainstay, but we could use Physical Immunity when push came to shove.

That should do it for skill training. Now, how to deal with Gaudartha?

Physical Immunity was our core skill against the rhino. While it wasn't feasible for long dungeon expeditions, the Immunity skill could last an entire tournament match.

We didn't know how much stronger Gaudartha would get after Awakening, but I could imagine him using his greataxe for defense as well as attack. What most frightened me was his general toughness. He had over a thousand HP, further bolstered by Fast Regeneration and Tough Hide. Trying to claim victory through chipping damage was a fool's errand.

"We'll use our trump card if it comes down to it," said Fran.

Yeah. We didn't get to use it against the Beast King, so it'll come as a complete surprise. It should throw him off, at the very least.

"Hm!"

I think that's enough training for today. Let's head home so you can rest.

"Hang on. I wanna go see Lumina."

Fran had gotten familiar with the old Black Cat during our stay in Bulbola. Lumina seemed fond of her, too. Their relationship was like a loving grandmother and granddaughter.

You're right. We should check in with her while we're here.

"Hm."

We hopped over to the teleportation room Lumina had made for us. I had acquired a spell called Beacon after maxing out my Dimension Magic. It created a kind of landmark which allowed us to amplify a teleportation spell. For example, a Short Jump usually had the maximum distance of ten meters, but with Beacon it could go all the way up to thirty. Beacon would disappear after a few days, but you could extend its lifespan by charging it with mana. I was sure I could make my Beacon last an entire year if I spent all my mana casting it.

We'd asked Lumina if we could set up a Beacon in her dungeon. With the amplification it provided, we should be able to meet her from any part of the world using Dimension Gate, so we'd asked about it a few days ago.

"Hello again. Are you here to chat, or is there something on your mind?"

"We want to suggest something."

You see...

I explained Beacon to Lumina, and asked if we could set the spell up to allow us to travel there quickly. She'd learned of my existence a few days ago, and Fran was quite happy about it, since it meant she had one fewer thing to hide.

"By all means. I've been wanting someone to set one up, but..."

But?

"Never mind. Give it a shot. It shouldn't be dangerous."

Lumina sounded like she had reservations, but I decided to cast the spell anyway, since she assured us it would be safe.

Beacon.

I placed a Beacon in a corner of the room. We should be able to teleport there from the outside now.

Okay, let's go up one floor.

"Hm."

We returned to the fourteenth floor to cast Dimension Gate, but it didn't work. I spent the mana, but the spell fizzled into nothing. I felt Beacon respond, but we were still in the same spot. It should've worked. I was sure I'd fulfilled all the requirements. But no matter how many times I tried, something stopped me from opening a gate.

"No good?"

Yeah. It feels like there's something blocking me.

Some kind of magic barrier, in all likelihood. The effect was similar to when we were trapped in Linford's force field. We returned to Lumina, and she nodded with a knowing look.

"I guess you couldn't break the Goddess' protection."

I understood immediately that some kind of barrier was to blame. Clearing dungeons was tough work, and D-Rank dungeons were known to claim more than their fair share of victims. There were monsters and traps that could kill even experienced adventurers on a bad day. Now, what was the easiest way to clear a dungeon? Learn all you can about it? Explore with a balanced party?

Stock up on potions and other emergency provisions?

No. The easiest way was to clear the dungeon without setting foot in it. For example, teleporting immediately into the Core Room and destroying the core, opening a gate and blasting it with magic from the outside, and so on.

The strategy wasn't unreasonable, either. You could technically teleport right there by maxing out Dimension Magic, or with the help of some other manatech. There were also the Godswords—weapons which surpassed all common sense. Lumina knew about one such weapon: Nuclear Sword Meltdown. The blade no longer existed, but the name was enough to convey its immense power.

A spell of protection was imbued in the dungeons to protect them from this sort of abuse. The dungeons were a gift from the gods for the training of man, and it was much better for everyone involved if you couldn't cheat your way through. If the gods were in on it, no wonder the barrier was so absolute.

"You only need to prevent your mana from being disrupted, yes?"

"Hm."

"Then hang on."

Lumina retreated to her room. A few minutes later, we heard a rumbling as a cave formed in the wall in front of us. We peeked inside and found that it was a long passageway.

"I'm back. I've set up a room at the end of this hallway that allows you to teleport to it as long as you have Teacher with you."

Lumina used her powers as a Dungeon Master to create a room just for us. Although the room was built in mere minutes, it was decorated with small details, showcasing the authority of her office.

"Thanks."

"Likewise. As I said, I've been waiting for someone to come along and set this up for me."

We tried Dimension Gate again and a portal immediately opened to the room Lumina had made. The inn where we were staying was quite near the dungeon,

so we could quietly and easily visit her whenever we wanted. Fran nodded with satisfaction.

“Feel free to visit me whenever. You are always welcome here.”

“Hm.”

We'll come again soon.

And so we used that very room to visit Lumina today. She felt our arrival and personally welcomed us.

“Hello there.”

“Hm.”

Hey.

“I see you’ve won again. You’re at the quarterfinals now. I hear you’re going up against an A-Rank adventurer next.”

Yeah. One of the Beast King’s elite guards.

“Do you really plan on winning? I thought passing the third round was enough to grant you an audience with him.”

“I’ll win to show everyone that Black Cats can be strong.”

We’re pulling out all the stops tomorrow.

“I see... Very well. Go and claim your victory.”

“Hm!”

We talked skills and spells with Lumina for a while before returning to the inn. We had the privilege of fighting in the first match tomorrow, so Fran had to get up earlier than usual.

“Good luck!”

“Thanks.”

We'll go out and win!

Chapter 4:

Everything in Our Power *T*ODAY'S THE DAY, *Fran*.

"Hm."

Gaudartha's an A-Rank. He'll be as much of a monster as Amanda.

"I know, but still."

We're going to win.

"Hm! Definitely!" Fran nodded vigorously. She couldn't help but be excited.

"Fran, the first match is starting soon. Are you prepared?" The tournament official had arrived to fetch her.

"Hm. I'm good."

"Right this way."

Fran walked down the hallway at her usual pace. She might be more motivated than before, but showed no sign of nerves. She had won three matches and fulfilled the Beast King's requirement for an audience. She could make reckless plays against Gaudartha now, and that pleased her greatly.

Now we could try out the game plan we'd cooked up the other day. I would open the match by raising Fran's stats slightly with Support Magic. She would then charge me with as much mana as she could, refueling her own pool with potions. The 1,500 points of mana she added into my blade would add up to a total of 3,700 Attack, but we had to do this just before the match started. I couldn't hold the mana for very long, so we'd have to end the fight as soon as possible.

Are you sure you can chug eight mana potions in a row, Fran?

"No problem," Fran answered with a calm expression.

This strategy would only work because of her gluttony. A normal fighter would be too bloated to fight after guzzling that many.

"Let's go."

Sure thing.

The familiar applause of the crowd welcomed us as Fran entered the arena. She had grown used to it, and didn't wince this time.

"Making her way from the East Gate is the eye of the storm of this tournament...the Swordceress, Fran! She's caused one upset after another by knocking out your favorite fighters! Today, she's up against an A-Rank, but will the cutest rising star of our generation shake things up again?!"

The commentator liked her, at least. It was hard not to root for the little girl who was giving it her all. The only ones opposed to her would be Blue Cats and compulsive gamblers.

"Good luck, Fran!"

"We've got a lot of money riding on you!"

"We're counting on you to get us seconds for dinner tonight!"

Lydia and the Crimson Maidens cheered her on from the front row. Despite their blatant display of vested interest, I appreciated their honesty and support. Fran waved back at them and it provoked an eruption of applause from the crowd.

They sure like you, Fran.

You think so?

She didn't seem to care. It made no difference to her whether they stayed quiet or cheered. The commentator raised his voice above the noise and began introducing the other combatant.

"Coming in from the West Gate. He's bulldozed the competition so far with sheer brute strength...Diamond Wall Gaudartha! He hasn't been touched a single time so far—will he win this match unscathed?!"

Gaudartha was also welcomed with applause, but there were some boos mixed in. Fran was more popular than him, then. However, it felt that the match had already been decided in his favor. Even Fran's supporters wondered how long she'd be able to last. She was going up against an A-Rank, so the audience's expectations were quite justified, really. But again, Fran didn't care.

I'm looking forward to when we turn this crowd around.

“Hm!”

Gaudartha’s equipment looked different from before. His crimson plate armor danced with flames, and he held a terrifying pitch-black battle axe in his hands. His current equipment looked like it was geared for maximum offense.

I couldn’t identify any of it, either. I got a look at some of its stats and skills, but the finer details were completely hidden. Hopefully his equipment didn’t have some kind of dangerous gimmick... Then again, if the rhino had bothered to change his equipment for this occasion, I should prepare for the worst.

Gaudartha walked to the center of the ring. The contrast between the two-meter-tall giant and the little girl was enough to make the audience hold their breath. They knew the difference in power was impossible to bridge.

“Good job making it here,” Gaudartha said with a low, intimidating voice.

He was ready to throw down. Fran narrowed her eyes and looked up, just as consumed with battle lust. “And I’m going to win today.”

“That’s the spirit. Don’t expect me to go easy on you. You’d better come at me with all you’ve got.”

“Of course.” Gaudartha had to lower his gaze to meet hers, but he didn’t underestimate her. In fact, he showed her the respect worthy of a strong opponent.

The commentator explained the rules. “Thanks to his lordship the Beast King’s courtesy, the Cradle of Time will be available to us, starting from the quarterfinals!”

The Cradle of Time was manatech which allowed time to be rewound in a given area. It would activate when someone in the tournament died, bringing them back to the moment before. The item was highly valued, and usually only utilized from the semifinals onwards. However, with the Beast King’s sponsorship this year, it could be used from the quarterfinals onward. The Cradle of Time allowed combatants a no-holds-barred battle to the death. It also preserved the memory of the person whose time was reversed, making it the perfect tool for a fighting tournament.

Ring-outs were no longer in play. The fight only ended in death, surrender, or

incapacitation. A powerful barrier was put up to shield the audience from the fierce battle, strong enough to withstand the force of a dragon's breath. The combatants could go all out without reservations.

"I won't go easy on you just because you're a Black Cat. I know how powerful your race can become."

"Just what I was hoping for." Fran pulled me out of my sheath and readied me, swinging me a couple times. Gaudartha felt the charge of mana coursing through me and grinned.

"An enchanted sword? And no ordinary one by the looks of it."

"You've got cool armor, too."

"This is my battle armor for when I go to war. A Godsmith crafted it with Identity Protection, Self-Repair, and Magic Resistance. Not quite a Godsword, but still powerful."



What the heck?! I mean, I might have been made by a Godsmith, too, but this guy *knew* where his armor came from. Godsmith equipment was gonna be tough to crack. My confidence in my strength only served as a reminder that Gaudartha's armor might have some tricks up its sleeve, too. I had a bad feeling about this!

"I shall make this fight brief! Awaken!" Gaudartha shouted.

His skin turned an ashy gray as the beastman grew even more beastly than before.

"Gaudartha Awakens his evolved beastman blood! I've never seen anyone Awaken *before* a fight! Is Fran that much of a threat?! We'll see in a second. Begin!"

Gaudartha was Awakened now. Unlike Zehmet, his stats remained the same. However, most of his skills were dramatically powered up. Fast Regeneration was at Level 8 now, and Steel Body, Heightened Reflex, and Iron Hide were added to his skill list. As if that wasn't enough, a thick current of mana pulsed through his body.

Name: Gaudartha Age: 44

Race: White Rhinoceros/Black-Iron Rhinoceros Class: Marauder Level: 72/99

HP: 1256; Magic: 422; Strength: 654; Agility: 267

Skills: Intimidate 8; Brute Strength 8; Punch Arts 5; Punch Mastery 5; Presence Sense 3; Fast Regeneration 8; Brute Force 10; Club Arts 6; Club Mastery 6; Mining 8; Regeneration 10; Abnormal Status Resistance 7; Blink 3; Mental Status Resistance 7; Elemental Blade 8; Rush 7; Axe Arts 10; Axe Mastery 10; Advanced Axe Arts 6; Advanced Axe Mastery 7; Mana Sense 3; Spirit Control; Steel Body; Goblin Killer; Heightened Reflexes; Dull Pain; Dragon Killer; Tough Hide; Iron Hide Class Skill: Awaken; Wave Blast Titles: Protector; Great Mountain; Dungeon Conqueror; Dragon Killer; A-Rank Adventurer Equipment: Earth Dragon Horn Greataxe; Earth Dragon Scale Armor; Fire Gland Cloak; Decoy Bracelet; Poison Sense Ring "Hrrngh!" He attacked as soon as the bell rang. Gaudartha swung his axe, shedding shockwaves. They were quite

controlled as they approached Fran, but even Gaudartha's restrained opener was enough to kill a C-Threat monster in one hit.

Let's go, Fran!

"Hm."

Explosion!

I threw out a Fireball spell to block. It crashed into his shockwaves, creating an explosion and kicking up smoke and dust. I teleported us a short distance away, right behind Gaudartha.

"Tch!"

Targeting his neck, Fran pressurized her sheath and slashed. Our smokescreen made for the perfect ambush, and it went without saying that she had already applied Elemental Blade and Vibrofang, among other buffs. She was aiming to kill.

Gaudartha remained still, even when my blade was lodged in his neck. I felt the dull sensation of his flesh and bone as blood sprayed out of the cut.

"Gah!"

Dammit!

But it was too early to celebrate. Before I could decapitate him, I was stalled by his barrier, his thick hide and muscles, and his powerful armor. His defenses absorbed most of the impact. Fran's one slash only went halfway through Gaudartha's powerful neck. We would need to repeat this attack for it to be fatal. His defense was absolutely monstrous, but this was our only chance.

Let's see if he can survive my spike form!

I sought to attack him from the inside, but before I could transform, Gaudartha made his move.

"Wave Blast!" Gaudartha shouted.

"Gaah!"

An explosion of mana erupted from his body, knocking us back. He was completely calm, despite having a sword cut halfway through his neck. Even his

nerves were made of steel! His Wave Blast not only created distance between us, but also took out half of Fran's health and most of my durability. The move was more powerful than his opening slashes.

"Urgh!"

"Hnngh!" Gaudartha followed up with some shockwaves, spitting blood.

"Umph..."

Greater Heal!

"Huff...huff..." Fran stabilized herself at a safe distance and healed the damage to her lungs.

You all right?

"I'm fine."

Just as I'd thought, we couldn't afford to get hit even once. Gaudartha displayed amazing control in how he recovered from what should've been a lethal blow.

There go our plans of killing him with one hit...

He's a lot tougher after Awakening.

It's that Iron Hide of his. It's like he put on another layer of armor. As if his superior plate wasn't enough! We'll have to figure out a way to take it away.

"Okay."

I put the points I had been saving for just such an occasion into a certain skill. It was the only way we could survive this battle of attrition.

You'll have to chip away at him while dodging his attacks. It's going to be rough, but try not to die.

Got it.

And we don't know what his armor can do, either. Keep your guard up.

"Hm!"

While we licked our wounds, Gaudartha had healed completely. "Graaaaah!"

"Tch!"

How is he already fine?!

The giant leapt toward us with a speed unbefitting of a man his size. His terrifying regenerative capabilities had perfectly healed the gash in his neck. They continued trading blows—Fran with her thousand cuts and Gaudartha with his giant swings.

Gaudartha mostly used Axe Arts, followed up with Wave Blast. If it weren't for the barriers protecting the audience, hundreds of them would be dead by now. Blocking that kind of attack head-on would knock a ton of durability off my blade, so Fran focused on dodging.

Meanwhile, she chipped away by exploiting the little gaps in his armor, but it wasn't working as well as we'd hoped. His wounds healed almost immediately, making it impossible for us to wear him down. We tried damaging his armor, but it repaired itself as fast as he did. In fact, his armor could repair itself faster than Fran's Black Cat Set. Whichever Godsmith crafted it really outdid himself! What an awful foe!

I tried blasting it with magic, but the armor's Magic Resistance dissipated my spells into nothing. Together with Gaudartha's high physical resistance, his armor made him a mobile fortress.

"Haaa! Wave Blast!"

Gaudartha used his Class Skill up close this time. It produced a powerful burst of energy, inflicting damage to everything in his vicinity. This simple and terrifying move allowed him to knock his enemies off-balance and deal a significant amount of damage. At a longer range, it could even be used as an emergency barrier. Physical Immunity didn't completely block it, either, since it was a mixture of physical and magical damage.

I managed to get a barrier up in time, but we didn't escape unscathed. Gaudartha was waiting for this kind of deadlock to chip away at Fran's health. He knew that even if she healed the damage, she would suffer a stamina deficit. A battle of attrition was in his favor.

It was said that a lion uses all its power to hunt a rabbit, and that was how Gaudartha was handling this battle. Although aware of his advantage over Fran, he handled her with the seriousness of an enemy at war, and we were definitely

losing more health and mana than him. If we let Gaudartha have his way, it was only a matter of time before Fran made a mistake.

Time to turn this around!

Jet!

“Grrr!”

“Harumph! So you can use summons, as well! Don’t assume a helping hand will be enough to overcome my defenses!”

I knew that. Jet was strong, but his attacks were of the fast and stealthy kind. We had another reason for bringing him out.

Now’s our chance, Fran! It’s time to drain his mana, just like we planned!

Hm!

Mana Drain was the skill I had just leveled up. I only had enough to get it to Level 9, but it was more than enough to make a difference. Our fight with Colbert made it clear that Physical Immunity didn’t make us invincible. It couldn’t nullify magical attacks, and the resource drain was almost unbearable. Mana Drain was our solution to this problem. Draining mana from our opponent helped us recover our own, while taking away his attack power at the same time.

We didn’t level it up during the match with Colbert because we didn’t know how much of a difference it would make. It was only at Level 3 then, and I couldn’t risk putting points into a skill that could be a dead end. After all, we still had another trick up our sleeve. Our doubts were cleared after consulting Dias and Lumina. Both confirmed that Mana Drain was a dangerous skill, given a high enough level. Dangerous enough to cause Lumina concern, and to give Dias shivers as he recounted an episode from his early years. Very good signs, indeed.

Gaudartha’s mana was already being drained. He was spending more on recovery to deal with Jet’s flurry of attacks. I had switched my Elemental Blade to Shadow to stack up the drain effect. We weren’t dealing much damage, but that was all right. Our immediate goal was to dry up his mana. We were already draining it fast enough to outpace his armor’s Mana Regeneration. Eventually,

Gaudartha felt the effects.

Reduce his mana pool enough, and the skill which kept him Awakened should deactivate. At that point, we could go in for the kill.

“Hm? What the...?!” It didn’t seem like he realized I was the source of his disappearing mana. Even so, the large man kept his cool and changed his strategy accordingly. “Roooooargh!”

Gaudartha took a sudden leap forward, seemingly in desperation. He abandoned his defensive posture and made a wild attempt to squash Fran with the weight of his body. A direct hit would leave her smeared on the floor, but the attack was far too predictable.

However, Gaudartha wasn’t targeting Fran to begin with.

“Ground Shaker!”

He was targeting the ring itself.

Boooooom!

Gaudartha slammed his axe into the center of the ring, creating a fissure which spiderwebbed out to its edges. A miniature earthquake followed, and the tremors threw Fran and Jet off balance.

“Hrmph!”

“Arf?”

The quake must’ve been about a seven on the Richter Scale. As agile as Fran was, she was having trouble holding her ground.

He was targeting the arena?!

Before I could finish my thought, the greataxe—which had been lodged in the ground mere moments ago—almost made contact with Fran’s midsection. I didn’t think Gaudartha could move that fast. He must’ve used one of his other skills along with Heightened Reflexes. I accelerated myself with Timespace Magic and took over. Fran was still caught up in the aftershocks of the earthquake.

Short Jump!

I got us out of there as fast as I could.

“Urgh...”

Greater Heal! Greater Heal! Greater Heal!

The end of the fight with Colbert was coming back to haunt us. Fran’s stomach was slashed open, blood and guts pouring out of the gaping wound. She coughed up blood and bile, and I was amazed that she hadn’t died of shock.

Fran!

“I-I’m fine...ack.”

She managed to recover just before Cradle of Time could activate. She spat out the remaining blood and staggered to her feet, but her opponent was faster than her.

“Urraaaagh!”

We almost cut your head off, how are you still okay?!

Gaudartha advanced toward us. His large body showed no signs of slowing down.

It’s our turn now!

Fran was doing pretty well after her near-evisceration. In fact, her near-death experience seemed to have motivated her further. Gaudartha took his greataxe and slammed it to the ground.

“Ground Shaker!”

Again?! But we had seen this trick before. Gaudartha’s follow-up attack was fast, but Ground Shaker itself had a long startup. It gave us enough time to use Physical Immunity.

“Hrngh!”

Gaudartha followed up Ground Shaker with another horizontal slash. He pulled it off smoothly, like he had rehearsed this combo a thousand times. It must’ve seemed to everyone like Fran had no time to react. The crowd gasped with terror as they anticipated Fran’s death, but the gasps soon died down and were replaced with confused murmurs.

“Won’t work this time.”

“Impossible!”

If the crowd was shocked, then Gaudartha was absolutely beside himself. He widened his eyes as he looked up and down at his weapon. Although his move focused on speed, the sheer mass of his metal axe was more than enough to cut through Fran like butter. Yet Fran was still standing there, grinning, unfazed, and still in one piece. Everyone was confused at how the great giant of a man had failed to move a little girl. She wasn’t even straining to maintain her barrier.

It was impossible for Gaudartha to believe, and Fran exploited his shock.

“Haaaa!”

“Grrr!”

“Urk!”

Now that he was in striking distance, she wasted no time in going on the offensive. She pelted him with powerful spells and skills, all of them greatly draining his mana.

Just a little more! He’s almost spent!

“Tchaaaaa!”

“Hrrrngh!”

Gaudartha countered with several quick swings, but they weren’t fast enough. Eventually, his mana pool dried up.

“Gah!!”

He was finally knocked out of his Awakened state. We had to take him down before his armor recovered his mana!

Come on! Short Jump!

We jumped behind Gaudartha, intent on finishing the match with one great attack.

Instead of his defenseless back, we were greeted with Gaudartha’s terrifying greataxe. Teleportation had a very small timeframe in which you could react. Even without Heightened Reflexes, Gaudartha read our play. Maybe he’d

gained his instincts from those long years as a soldier, or perhaps beastmen had sharper instincts than other races. His greataxe met Fran's blade and threw her back. She managed to block his swing, but the force reverberated through her body, making it difficult to hold on to me.

"Hngh!"

Fran rolled to dodge Gaudartha's follow-up. Despite no longer being in an Awakened state, he was still powerful enough to leave cracks in the stadium floor. We struggled to find a gap in his defenses.

Didn't expect any less from an A-Rank...!

We had to finish this before he got his mana back...but how? A plunging attack from above? Maybe from the sides? Too obvious. Should we turn on Physical Immunity and attack with reckless abandon? We didn't have enough mana for that. As I was going through our options, Fran cast the deciding vote.

Teacher, we'll go up! He won't be able to stop us, even if he sees us coming!

Got it.

It sounded like a plan. If Fran's mind was made up, then my duty was to carry it out.

Jet, keep him busy!

Woof!

Long Jump!

"Hm?"

"Grrr!"

Gaudartha looked around, trying to work out where she'd gone. He couldn't work it out, and Jet would keep him busy enough that he never would. The audience and commentator were as much in the dark as he was.

"What's this? Fran has disappeared from the ring! Did she teleport? Turn herself invisible? Maybe she took to the shadows!"

The correct answer was the sky. Fran hopped on the flat of my blade as I moved in, so she could concentrate on unleashing her powerful attack. Once

she was ready, she muttered.

“Let’s go.”

Right.

She grabbed my hilt and began her descent. She used Air Current Manipulation and Mana Thread to catapult herself to the ground and accelerated further with Air Hop, Rush, and Wind Magic. Her moment of impact was further magnified with Increase Weight, along with two Elemental Blades: Fire and Lightning. The concept was the same as the high-altitude Pressurized Quickdraw we’d used in the battle against Linford, only this time, we were much higher in the sky. And this time, we’d be stronger. Fran was accelerating faster with Timespace Magic, had more control of her sword thanks to Sword King Mastery, and could put out more power with Spirit Control.

“Thunderclap!”

Fran used the Class Skill she had just acquired. Lightning enveloped her body, further increasing her speed. She took the form of a spear of lightning as she fell towards Gaudartha like a shooting star.

“Haaaaa!”

“Where is—”

Gaudartha looked up, finally picking up on Fran’s presence. She had drawn me from her pressurized sheath and my blade was already before his eyes. She crashed into the arena with a dazzling flash. Loud rumbling followed the bolt of lightning that scorched into the earth.

“Graaaaaaaaaaah!” Gaudartha let out a bestial roar.

Short Jump!

I teleported Fran to a corner of the ring before she could lodge herself into the ground. There was a large crater where Gaudartha had been, and plumes of smoke emerged from it.

Teacher, are you okay?!

I’m fine, Fran! I’m fixing myself already. But that armor of his is tougher than I thought! I can’t believe that wasn’t enough to cut through...

My plan had been to cut through Gaudartha's left shoulder to his heart. That should be enough to put the big man down. I'd felt myself cut through his armor and into his flesh, but just as I was about to reach his heart, my blade snapped off. I wasn't durable enough to withstand that armor.

I'm sorry, Fran! I've been useless this whole fight!

It's not your fault. Besides, he definitely felt that one.

Yeah. Cradle of Time hasn't triggered yet, but he should have a hard time moving— Shoom!

I stopped as I felt a huge burst of mana from the dust cloud. It blew away the smoke that had settled in the crater. We had shocked the crowd and Gaudartha with Physical Immunity, but now it was our turn for a cruel surprise.

What the hell?! But he has no mana! How did he recover from that?!

Gaudartha fell on one knee, clearly inches from death. His left arm was missing. His body was broken and fluid gushed out of him. His right arm was crushed and his left leg was fractured at best. I doubted his organs had escaped this onslaught unscathed. Although he'd managed to deflect some of the damage, we still inflicted a huge amount of hurt.

But now his wounds were healing at an unbelievably rate. Instant Regeneration was doing its thing, and even his heavily damaged armor was beginning to fix itself. In a matter of seconds, Gaudartha was back to fighting form.

"Huff...huff...I didn't think I'd need the armor's help so soon..." Gaudartha said as he slowly got back on his feet. "Phoenix Armor possesses great regenerative capabilities."

Yeah, I could see that! All his injuries were gone... As if the defense value of Gaudartha's armor wasn't bad enough, it came with ridiculous recovery abilities, too? This was a nightmare. How many more charges of this trick did he have left? There's no way he could keep it up indefinitely, but I didn't think it was a one-time thing, either. The armor was crafted by a Godsmith, after all.

Teacher, one more time!

No. He's already seen that move. He knows how to anticipate it.

All right.

Teleporting around too much would make it easier for him to read us. That was why we hadn't used too much. If Fran could figure out the Demon's Shadow Walk back in Alessa, a more experienced fighter could definitely spot our teleport tells. Unlike Short Jump, a plunging attack made her an obvious target if you knew where to look. Using it again was far too risky.

We looked at Gaudartha in shock. His full recovery was bad enough, but he took it one step further.

"He's...Awakened again?"

Yeah. He's back at full mana, too.

Our efforts to whittle away at his mana pool were wasted. To make things worse, our resources were still draining away. I wasn't one to talk, being a magical sentient sword, but that armor should've been banned! It was overpowered!

With Gaudartha back to the same state he was before the match started, Fran made up her mind.

I'll have to use it.

Can't be helped.

Even if we drained all his mana again, his armor would just put him back the way he was before. Still, its power took about a second to activate. We needed to drain his mana and kill him before it could happen. That was the simplest way of winning.

You're not used to that form yet, so we have to be quick about this. We don't know what'll happen to you if you stay that way for too long.

I know.

And don't expect anything from Physical Immunity. I won't have time to fiddle with it at that speed.

Never planned to, Fran declared.

I was prepared to back her up, especially considering that she couldn't really die in this fight. This was our best chance to try out her new powers.

"Jet, take to the shadows and keep him busy."

"Woof!"

"Here we go!"

Gaudartha knew from the look in her eyes that she was putting everything on the line. He allowed her to make her last stand as she gathered up mana. "I don't know what you're planning, but it will not be enough to defeat me! Come at me with all you've got! I'll put a stop to it!"

"I'll kill you!"

We'd done everything in our power to prepare for the tournament. I gathered up the crystals and ranked up. And Fran...

"Awaken."

Evolved.

Boooooom!

Mana exploded outwards. Black bolts of lightning crackled about Fran, forming a thunderstorm around her. Gaudartha only stared in stunned silence.

"Awaken...?"

"Hm."

"A Black Cat...?"

Gaudartha could be forgiven for his shock. A Black Cat had just evolved right in front of his eyes. This was our ace in the hole: the pinnacle of the beastman tribes, which Fran achieved with Lumina's assistance. Her appearance didn't change much. She didn't grow extra fur and her skin remained the same color. She didn't increase in age, and whiskers didn't sprout from her face. What changed were her eyes—a striking gold—and her tail, which pointed towards the sky like a lightning rod. If you paid close enough attention, her black tail now had gray stripes on it, but it was easily missed.

However, her stats had certainly increased. Three hundred points in Agility

and Magic, along with a complete recovery of health and mana. It didn't stop there. Evolving granted her access to a particular skill.

“Flashing Thunderclap.”

This was the advanced form of Lumina's Thunderclap, unlocked after she evolved. Lumina had used it to fight in her normal state, but its true potential remained locked away until one evolved. In her Awakened state, Flashing Thunderclap granted Fran Strength Up, Agility Up, Heightened Reflexes, Elemental Blade Thunder, Enhanced Thunder, Thunder Immunity, and Thunder Magic Up. It was much more powerful than before.

Seeing Fran in her Awakened state hyped up the commentator.

“Fran has Awakened, ladies and gentlemen! But what's this? She doesn't look that much different than before! Not that she needs to with those threatening thunderclouds floating around her! I've never seen black lightning fall from the sky before, let alone from a person!”

Lumina's lightning had been a natural pale blue, but Fran's was inky black. Her bolts looked like they belonged in a sumi-e painting rather than in the clouds.

Fran had evolved into a Black Sky Tiger of yore.

“We've all heard the stories about the impossibility of Evolution for Black Cats, but Swordceress Fran has proven that false!”

To a non-beastman, the fact of Fran's Evolution was surprising, but they were far more interested in how much stronger she was now. The beastmen, on the other hand, looked absolutely solemn.

“...”

Gaudartha stood in the arena, mouth agape, looking like he had completely forgotten about the battle. Meanwhile, in the VIP area, the Beast King had gotten out of his seat to stare. He leaned on the rails, looking like he wanted to get into the ring himself just so he could confirm it. Rosch, seated next to him, wore the exact same expression.

“A Black Sky Tiger?” Gaudartha croaked, finally returning to his senses. “To think I would be in the presence of one of the Ten...! How did I not notice

before...?”

Gaudartha shook his head in disbelief. This was our chance. Fran leaned forward, ready to exploit this gap.

Ready?

Let's go!

She rushed in at the rhino.

“Where did—gah!”

“Hmph!”

“Urgh! What...?!”

To Gaudartha, it must've looked like Fran had disappeared. No teleportation or invisibility here, just raw speed. The attack caught him completely off guard, and he wailed in pain. She slashed at him, but most of the damage came from her jet-black lightning. It ran through his armor and burned him up. This was the power of her Awakened state. Fran was too fast for Gaudartha, and her Black Lightning was penetrating his previously invincible defenses.

“Gah! Guh!”

“Haaaa!”

She continued to attack with blinding speed. Black Lightning not only gave her immense speed, but also maneuverability and control. The skill allowed her to ignore the laws of physics while maintaining her velocity. The concept was similar to Zehmet's, the Blue Cat we fought in our first round. His Evolution made him fast enough to run circles around his opponent. The only difference was that Fran's Evolution gave her even more speed, control, and attack power.

Perhaps that was why the Blue Cats hated the Black Cats so much. Their evolved abilities were quite similar, and I could easily imagine the Blue Cats resenting the Black Cats for their strength.

“There's a lot going on right now! You wouldn't know Fran was still in the arena if not for the streaks of black lightning furiously circling Gaudartha! You can hear him scream in pain, folks!” the commentator cried.

It looked like a black dome of electricity had formed around Gaudartha. I struck his Phoenix Armor, producing a high-pitched ring with each contact. It was still repairing itself, although I was outpacing its capabilities so far. Although Gaudartha's armor was in top shape, the same couldn't be said for the beastman himself. Cords of black lightning twisted and struck, burning him up.

“Ngaaaah!”

Eventually, he abandoned all pretense of defense and started swinging his greataxe in desperation. He held it out and spun, emitting Wave Blasts. The combination served to clear the immediate area, but Fran was agile enough to duck under the axe. As for the Wave Blast, she used Absolute Barrier to handle it. Being at the limits of her mana, she could only use it for a split second, but she timed it perfectly.

Fran could read Gaudartha's every move. Although the large man was throwing all of his fast attacks at her in a last-ditch attempt at victory, they all seemed slow to Fran. She was definitely faster than him. Despite his best attempts, he couldn't stop her flurry of attacks.

“Haaaaa!”

“Hrngh...!”

Gaudartha crossed his arms in front of his body, accepting that he couldn't land a hit. He put all his efforts into defense. Turtling seemed like the coward's way out, but Gaudartha hadn't lost an ounce of his fighting spirit. He was set on taking this strategy to victory.

No wonder he's Rigdith's personal bodyguard! He already figured out our weakness!

Hm!

Awakened Flashing Thunderclap drained Fran's health and mana with every use. The move was risky, and while not as dangerous as Unleash Potential, its power didn't come without cost. Flashing Thunderclap wreaked havoc on its user's body—mere movement took away health. All of the Ten Ancestors' special powers worked on the same principle. The raw power of the Godbeast was far too strong for mortals. Limits had to be instituted to prevent its users

from self-destructing.

Gaudartha was an elite guard and a descendant of the Ten Tribes. He knew that, as powerful as they were, their skills were just as dangerous to their users. He carried his battle of attrition to its logical conclusion. He would defend himself until Fran was drained of every bit of energy.

And he was right. Fran was tiring. It was nothing short of a miracle that her tiny body had lasted this long. A normal beastman would've exhausted themselves by now, yet Fran showed no signs of stopping.

I could feel Gaudartha's bewilderment. Fran shouldn't be able to use Flashing Thunderclap for long periods of time, especially considering how fast she was and the number of attacks she was landing. By all accounts, she should've self-destructed.

But Fran was no ordinary beastman. She had me as a spare mana tank, and I kept her health up by constantly healing her. It was the only way she could prolong the effects of the skill.

"How are you still—argh!"

That said, we were still pressed for time. Fran's life was dropping faster and faster the longer this went on. Eventually, the upkeep would be impossible for me to heal through. Gaudartha only had a sliver of health left. Just one final push should do it. But Fran's health was reaching critical levels too, and I had to heal her every few seconds just to keep her from expiring. She knew that as well as I did.

I'll end it now, Teacher!

Go for it!

Fran could stop using her skill and finish Gaudartha off with her regular attacks. That would be the most prudent way to secure victory. But Fran kept Flashing Thunderclap on. She was going to win as a Black Sky Tiger and prove the strength of the Black Cat tribe to the world.

I'll finish him off using the big one.

The big one? I'm not sure if that's safe considering the amount of space we

have...

We'll be fine!

Are you sure about this?

Hm!

Well, no use talking her out of it. *Then I'll focus on defense.*

Thanks.

Jet, get one more hit in and hide.

Woof!

Jet obeyed, harassing Gaudartha one more time before retreating to the shadows. I saw him run all the way to the stands. That should do it. It was the only way to be safe from Fran's attack. Once she made sure Jet was at a safe distance, Fran declared her final move.

"Black Thunderfall!"

The black lightning around Fran's body glowed brighter. It gathered together and, with the rumbling of a drum, formed a bolt which launched itself at Gaudartha. The black lightning went wild inside the barrier and soon culminated in a grand explosion.

Kaboom!

I used what little mana I had left to protect Fran with Absolute Barrier, but the explosion proved far too powerful. It threw Fran like a leaf. She smacked right into the barrier.

"Gah...!"

Bits of rubble flew with the speed of bullets. Fran would've been gravely injured if it weren't for her barrier. The air around us became hot enough to scald.

Good thing we have Barrier on, but this is ridiculous!

"Hm!"

The innumerable bolts of lightning crawled along the arena like serpents

looking for prey, but they had no effect on Fran, thanks to her Thunder Immunity. The barrier I cast around my blade prevented me from melting.

Was that...too much?

I didn't know about that. Fact was, we were up against Gaudartha, who was a monster... If anything, that might not have been enough. We waited for the hurricane to subside, keeping our eyes open for any sudden movement.

When the spectators could see again, they gasped with awe at the giant crater where Gaudartha had been standing. Fran's Black Lightning was seven times worse than the rhino's Ground Shaker.

In the midst of the chaos, Gaudartha was on his knees, unmoving. The ground beneath him was red as molten glass, galvanized by the heat of Fran's lightning. His Phoenix Armor was in pieces, having taken so much damage that it couldn't repair itself. What little flesh we could see under the armor was an ashen gray, and I wouldn't be surprised if nothing was left of the man but his armor.

"Did we win?"

Don't say that yet, you'll jinx it!

"Hm?"

Despite my superstitious protest, a pillar of white light shone on the arena. It encased Gaudartha in red light. About a minute or so later, the rhino was standing there, fully restored.

Wait, did we just— "The Cradle of Time has activated! Gaudartha has died and come back to life! Which means the winner of this round is the Swordceress Fran!"

Chapter 5:

Her Greatest Wish **SEVERAL DAYS** before the tournament—before Fran’s match with Zehmet, before our run-in with the Beast King at the Blue Cat encampment—we’d been training in the **dungeon.**

Let’s get some rest, Fran.

“Just a little more.”

I can tell that your concentration is dropping.

The endless fighting was beginning to take its toll. Mental exhaustion not only cost her fights, but also meant that she missed obvious traps. She was racking up damage from careless mistakes, but Fran only bit her lip and resolved to try harder.

“Just a bit more...”

Well, if you say so.

I sighed. I wanted her to be in top condition for the qualifiers, but Fran had other plans. Before she locked into combat with the Beast King, she wanted to evolve. It was the only way we’d have a chance against him, and Fran was beginning to panic. She showed no signs of evolving any time soon. I would have to use my trump card.

You wanna go see Lumina?

“What for?”

We can ask her why there’s so few monsters in the dungeon today.

“Sure.”

Fran nodded. My plan worked. I didn’t want to bother the Black Cat Dungeon Master, but Fran needed a break before she killed herself. We trekked through the dungeon and found Lumina sitting in the center of the room, looking spaced-out.

Huh?!

“Ah...!”

Lumina’s aura alarmed us. Her body was changing. Her white skin, which made her look so much like Fran, was darkening. A change in mere outward appearance was usually no cause for concern, but the degree of malice she exuded was distressing. We had only seen this kind of malice in Fiends. While she had yet to surpass the Archfiend Linford of Bulbola, she exhibited levels far beyond an average Goblin King.

“Lumina...?” Fran called out weakly.

She finally took notice of us. “Fran...”

Or perhaps not. Lumina was acting strange, which I suspected was the cause of the strangeness in the dungeon today. Fiends hated all the other races. Slaughter and destruction were their sole purpose. What if Lumina was infected with the same corruption? We wouldn’t be able to defeat her easily.

Lumina turned to look at Fran. She looked relieved to see the young Black Cat, but only for a second. Her expression soon hardened again.

“Hm. It’s me.”

“I see.” An unusually cold response. She would always welcome Fran with warmth and congeniality, but the malice was taking its toll.

“There are no monsters in the dungeon.”

“I see,” Lumina responded coldly. She wasn’t at all pleased to see Fran.

“Umm...”

“Fran. Leave.”

“What?”

“I am occupied with many things. I have no time to pamper you. Leave. I do not wish to see you...”

Lumina grabbed Fran’s shoulder and pushed her towards the exit. What was with her today? There had to be some reason. It didn’t make sense.

“But...!”

“You are not to come here ever again. That is final.”

Her words left Fran utterly shocked. She was confused by Lumina's sudden change. I checked her statements with Essence of Falsehood and found that they were true. That said, I didn't know whether her apparent cruelty was really what she wanted. Essence of Falsehood only allowed me to test the validity of a statement, and not the hidden meaning. Our encounter with Solus proved that.

If we left the dungeon now, we would probably never see Lumina again. Fran would be too afraid. We needed to know the truth. And we needed to do it before she turned into a Fiend, or it would be too late.

"Lumina..." Fran croaked.

She was terrified, but it was not the same fear that she had of the Beast King. She was afraid of losing a dear friend. Worse, she was afraid that Lumina hated her. A storm of emotions whirled through Fran's heart. In all her solitary life, she had finally met one of her kind. She got along with her, even respected her. Even if Lumina turned into a Fiend, Fran would still love her.

The pain of Lumina's rejection was too much. Fran had already lost Inina. If Lumina hated her, then she would not recover. At the same time, she couldn't ask for the truth.

I had to take matters into my own hands. Should I reveal myself? Fran and Lumina's relationship was infinitely more important than keeping my identity concealed. I made up my mind.

Why are you turning Fran away?

"Who...was that...?" Lumina turned around, trying to identify the source of my voice.

Over here!

I pulled myself out of Fran's sheath, declaring my existence.

"The sword has a will of its own...! And it's talking... Are you an Intelligent Weapon?"

Yeah.

"By the gods... To think that your kind actually exists."

"Are you sure about this, Teacher?"

Absolutely not! But it's too late for that now!

It was the first time I'd revealed myself to anyone. I was already regretting my decision. Still, I wasn't going to let Lumina send Fran off without an explanation. I knew that it pained Fran to keep my identity hidden from Lumina. She didn't want to have any secrets between them, and I felt her relief now.

My name is Teacher.

"Teacher? That's supposed to be your name?"

That's right. It's the best name Fran ever thought up and she gave it to me. I am Teacher the Intelligent Weapon, Fran's partner!

Lumina smiled at my declaration, tears welling up in her eyes. "Her partner. I see... So you're not alone, after all. Thank goodness."

"Hm?"

"Nothing. Pay no mind."

But I'd heard that "thank goodness" loud and clear. Lumina was worried for Fran. Was turning her away all an act?

"Are you a Godsword, by chance?" Lumina wasted no time in changing the subject. Since it was clear that she didn't really hate Fran, I obliged.

I don't think so. I'm just a sword with strange powers. Sorry about that.

"Strange powers? Like what?!"

Where did I start? My whole existence was strange.

What do you think, Fran? I can shrug it off by saying that I'm a talking, floating sword if you want.

Do you...mind me telling her everything?

It figured. Fran didn't want to hide any of it. Dias had already figured out that I was an Intelligent Weapon, so it was a little too late for privacy now. Still, Fran wanted to explain me to Lumina, and I was more than happy to let her.

All right, if you say so.

Thanks.

Fran told her everything. That I absorbed crystals, that I used to be a human, and that for some reason I woke up in the Demon Wolf's Garden. Lumina listened to her like a grandmother listening to her grandchild talk about their day. The cold act had dropped, the malice from before completely gone. She was the Black Cat Lumina again, who loved Fran dearly.

I had a vested interest in this conversation. The five-hundred-year-old Dungeon Master might know where I came from. But Lumina's first interjection came only on hearing about my ability to absorb crystals.

"You can gain skills from crystals? I didn't know such a possibility existed! Can you absorb anything? Even Unique and Extra skills?"

I haven't found a skill I couldn't extract from a crystal so far.

"The power to obtain any skill..."

No, no. Just from crystals. Let's be clear here.

Even so, a cog was turning in Lumina's mind. "I see... I see! Ha ha ha ha!"

"What?"

"No, it's nothing but...I see now!" Lumina burst into laughter. In any case, she looked like she was in a more cooperative mood now.

My turn to ask. Why did you ask Fran to go away?

"Let's just say I have my reasons."

Which are?

"That, I cannot say. But believe me when I say it is for Fran's own good."

Perhaps it was connected to Fran's Evolution? *You sounded like you didn't want to see her. Why?*

"Because I didn't want to hurt her."

What?

"But in doing so, I suppose I already have hurt her...Fran?"

"Hm?"

"I'm sorry!" Lumina bowed her head in apology. We couldn't make heads or

tails of what was going on. “My foolish designs have caused you great pain. I am sorry. It seems I got ahead of myself.”

“That’s okay. So you don’t hate me, Lumina?”

“Banish the thought! I would never hate you!”

“That’s good.”

But it didn’t explain why Lumina wanted to avoid Fran in the first place, or why learning of my existence had changed her mind.

I guess you’re not in the position to answer my questions?

“And for that, I apologize. I do wish to tell you everything...”

No, that’s all right.

“In any case, it seems you really can communicate with me. Your abilities are very powerful, indeed. I would believe you if you said you were a Godsword.”

I’m flattered, but I have it on good authority that I’m too weak.

I told Lumina about Garrus’ assessment, but she came up with an entirely different conclusion. “A Godsword isn’t defined by its prowess in battle.”

Wait, really?

“Indeed. Wait here. I’ll be back shortly.” Lumina disappeared into the back room and returned with an aged brown scroll. “Have a look at this.”

What is it?

“A list of Godswords I obtained a long time ago. It’s incomplete, however.”

Wow, really?!

“So these are the names of the Godswords?”

Now this was interesting. I looked at the scroll to find a list of names.

The First Godsword Alpha - Ulmer Mad Sword Berserk - Dionis X - Wisdom Sword Cherubim - Elmera War Carriage Sword Chariot - Folcan Searching Godsword Explorer - Elmera X - Mad Faith Sword Fanatic - Dionis Land Sword Gaia - Ulmer X - Spirit Sword Holy Order - Ulmer Gaolgate Sword Hel - Folcan Flame Sword Ignis - Ulmer X - Sentencing Sword Judgment - Ulmer Serpent Lord

*Sword Jormugandr - Fargo Water Sprite Sword Crystalos - Ulmer Cruel Dragon
Sword Lindworm - Fargo X - Nuclear Sword Meltdown - Folcan Lunar Sword
Moonlight - Cruselca Grimoire Sword Necronomicon - Elmera Communion Sword
Oratorio - Cruselca Hypocrite Sword Pacifist - Dionis Feathered Serpent Sword
Quetzal— The left column listed the names of the swords. Ignis, our old
acquaintance, was among them. There were Xs next to some of the names
though, and the list was cut off mid-sentence. To the right were some human-
sounding names, probably the ones who crafted the blades.*

“Do you know of the skill called Oracle of the Gods?”

“Nope.”

Never heard of it.

“It allows you to expend mana to ask a question of the gods themselves. And the gods will reply, although their answer depends on the amount of mana and the value of the information given. This scroll was produced when someone asked about the existence of the Godswords.”

The list looked incomplete. Did the skill deactivate midway through?

“The questioner didn’t have enough mana to ask for information about the Godswords. Once they ran out, they began to pay with their life. They couldn’t get all of the names of the Godswords or the ones who crafted them.”

What about the Xs?

“Godswords which were destroyed for some reason or another. It makes you wonder about the force able to destroy such a powerful artifact.”

Cherubim, Fanatic, Judgment, and Meltdown were gone. I didn’t expect Godswords to be so readily destructible.

“This scroll was written over five hundred years ago. More Godswords might have been made since then,” said Lumina.

“I see.”

“Now, see this Godsword called Explorer?” Lumina pointed to a portion of the scroll.

“The Searching Godsword?”

“Yes. There is a skill like Oracle of the Gods called Encyclopedic Index. It can tell you everything there is to know about an object, as long as you know its name. At the cost of mana, of course.”

I’m getting bad vibes from this... Lumina had mentioned trading mana for information.

“It is as you suspect. Explorer’s wielder wanted to know more about their sword. They cast Encyclopedic Index to learn about it, and lost their life in the process.”

I knew it!

“They did manage to learn a few things about the blade before they expired, however. The Godsword Explorer grants its user investigative and sensory skills while possessing less-than-impressive combat prowess. It is only as strong as an average enchanted sword.”

Seriously?

“Indeed. There are Godswords that can destroy continents, but also Godswords that are not fit for battle.”

Wait, does that mean— “Although, I do not think it applies in your case.”

Dang it!

“You said you did not come with a name. Having a name is a prerequisite for a Godsword.”

That’s what I thought when I first looked at the list. Still, I’d grown fond of Fran’s name for me, even proud of it. I would not accept another.

“Don’t be too hard on yourself. Intelligent Weapons are as legendary as Godswords. You are very impressive by yourself.”

“Hm. Teacher’s the best,” Fran agreed.

The compliment would have made me blush if not for my lack of cheeks. *Any chance you know about the one who made me?*

“Unfortunately, no. This is my first time encountering an Intelligent Weapon. I don’t know much about the Haunt called the Demon Wolf’s Garden, either. But

one thing is for certain.”

And that is?

“Only a Godsmith could’ve brought you into existence.”

But I’m not a Godsword.

“Godswords aren’t the only products a Godsmith can make, you know,” Lumina said, as if reading my mind.

Godsmiths might be known for creating legendary Godswords, but their trade allowed them to craft other tools and equipment. Who knows? Maybe one of them even made kitchen knives. Although, a kitchen knife crafted by a Godsmith... Now there was a utensil that could make ingredients taste better with every cut.

“Also, only twenty-six of these superweapons are ever allowed to exist at the same time. They are not things you make in your spare time. Rumor has it that crafting a single Godsword can take up to ten years, and that’s only in preparation.”

Ten years? What are you supposed to do in all that time?

“Who knows? These are rumors, to be sure. I do not know the details.”

I see. So you think a Godsmith crafted me to occupy time between Godswords?

“A possibility, yes.”

I didn’t know whether to be proud of the fact that I was made by a Godsmith or ashamed that I wasn’t a Godsword. Still, finding out more about these Godsmiths might give me a lead on my origins. Before that, though, I wanted to address something that had been bothering me.

You’re radiating a lot of malice, Lumina. What’s up with that?

“Hm. Your skin’s turning black.”

“Oh, this...I can’t say. But give me a few days and I’ll be back to normal. In fact, I’ll be stronger for it, so you have nothing to worry about.”

Lumina was still in control. I didn’t quite understand what she was saying, but

Fran massaged her chest in relief at hearing she would eventually be back to normal. Lumina was still herself, despite looking like a Fiend, but I couldn't shake off that last bit of discomfort.

Did the gods punish the Black Cats by taking away their ability to evolve?

"Yes."

Why'd they do it?

"That...I cannot say."

I thought so. But at least we'd confirmed Aurel's hypothesis of divine punishment.

I heard about the Ten Ancestors the other day. Are the Black Cats among them?

"Can't say."

Lumina's unique circumstance turned her denial into a confirmation, and I was just getting started.

I saw a piece of equipment called the Black Sky Tiger Cloak once. Does that have anything to do with the Black Cat tribe?

The cloak had belonged to Salut, a Raydossian spy and personal bodyguard to the Phyllian twins Fult and Satya. Was the cloak produced by doing unspeakable things to an evolved Black Cat? Skinning a person and wearing their hide as armor was an inhuman act by any standard, but considering the lengths Raydoss went to in search of power, I assumed the worst.

"Allow me to explain it in terms of the White Snow Wolves. There is a monster called the White Snow Wolf, quite separate from the White Snow Wolf of the Ten Ancestors. They are both children of the White Snow Wolf Godbeast. It is said that when the Godbeasts procreated with people, they produced the White Snow Wolf Beast Tribe. When they procreated with animals, they produced the White Snow Wolf monster."

Legends of gods mating with beasts and man had existed back on Earth, and apparently they did here, too.

"Though they have the same origins, they are completely different now. One

is human, the other beast. The White Snow Wolf monsters of today only vaguely resemble their ancestors. They are certainly more beast than man, and no longer deserve to be worshipped. Although these monsters are occasionally hunted down and killed, they are not the natural enemies of the White Dog Tribe. The same applies to the other Ten Tribes. You have nothing to worry about.”

Well, that was a relief. I guess it was like if a human were to kill a monkey—even though we had a common ancestor, it wouldn’t amount to murder. So the Black Sky Tiger Cloak Salut wore had come from a monster.

“I hear that the Beast King has arrived in Ulmutt,” said Lumina. “Careful that you don’t run into him. I hear nothing but bad things about the man.”

“Hm.” Fran winced at the mere mention of the Beast King. Their encounter had left a mark on her.

We’ve met.

“What?! Are you all right? Did he hurt you?”

Kind of. Fran got caught in the crossfire of his Intimidation. To be fair, the Beast King hadn’t seemed like he was targeting her on purpose.

“I’m fine now.”

“Are you sure?”

“Hm.”

“Even so, you mustn’t let your guard down as long as the Beast King is in town. You don’t know what he might do to you!”

Lumina hated the Beast King as much as Dias and Aurel did. The incident fifty-three years ago was still fresh in her mind. We asked her about Kiara, but she only knew what the other two had already told us, and could tell us even less because of the speech restrictions imposed on her by the goddess.

“You cannot trust anyone related to the Beast King!”

“Got it.”

“Awful rumors surround that man like thick smoke. You would do well to keep

a safe distance,” Lumina warned with a grim look on her face.

She certainly hated him, but I wondered if her reasons were personal. There were rumors that the Beast Kings were to blame for the slavery of the Black Cats, and it might just be true. Lumina clearly knew more about it than we did, though she wasn’t allowed to tell us.

“Promise me you’ll be careful.”

We will.

“Hm.”

The day after Lumina learned of my existence, she sent us a personal invitation to come meet me. Lumina greeted us with a smile as we came out of the teleportation room.

Seeing her was enough to make Fran sigh with relief. “Good.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re back to normal.”

Her skin had returned to its normal color and there wasn’t a trace of malice left in her. I didn’t know what had happened over the course of the day, but she was back to the Lumina we knew and loved. However, despite her best efforts, she still looked a bit pale. She had yet to make a full recovery. “I’ve been busy,” said Lumina.

Fran tilted her head to one side, and Lumina smiled. Her familiar emerged from the back room and started gesturing towards us.

“It looks like everything’s ready.”

Ready for what?

“Come and see,” Lumina said as she guided us down the hallway.

We followed her, frantic with worry.

“What’s going on?”

“Wait...” Lumina said, evasive.

She was looking more than a little worse for wear, like she had just lost a huge

amount of blood. We arrived at our destination just as her footsteps were beginning to waver. The room looked familiar—it was where Fran and Lumina had their mock fight. But it was different now, and that difference declared itself to us as we entered.

Is that a magic circle?

“It’s huge.”

The diagram was about a hundred meters in diameter. The pattern began in the middle and broke outwards, creating patterns within patterns. I’d never seen a magic circle of this scale before. What was she going to do with it?

“Huff...”

“Lumina, are you okay?”

Yeah, you don’t look so good.

“I really am all right. Don’t worry.”

A tall request, considering she practically collapsed into the chair her familiar brought out for her.

“The reason why I’ve called you here today is because I’ve prepared a test for you,” she said cryptically, pressing on through her pain. “Will you accept?”

A test?

“Yes,” she said. “What do you say?”

I wasn’t expecting a test...but refusing Lumina when she was in so much pain was difficult, if not impossible. Fran felt the same way.

“Hm.” She nodded.

Fran, we don’t even know what it’s going to be.

“Lumina prepared it. I’ll take it.”

“Thank you. But I warn you that it will be dangerous. You might lose your life if you are not prepared. I am giving you a chance to walk away.”

What?! We might die?! Now hang on just a second!

“We’ll take it.”

Fran!

“Teacher, please.”

Urgh... Fran’s kitty-cat eyes were the most powerful weapons in her arsenal. Still, I had to make sure. *Are you sure about this?*

“Of course.”

Lumina’s warned you about the dangers. You might die out there.

“That’s okay.” Her mind was made up.

All right...

“Thanks, Teacher.”

We would just have to give Lumina’s test our all. Besides, I knew she wouldn’t put Fran’s life in danger for nothing.

“Will you accept?”

“Hm!”

Whatever this test is, I assume Fran needs it.

“Yes.”

Essence of Falsehood did its thing. She was telling the truth. Well, we had to take it now.

Can Jet come with us?

“He may.”

“Grr!” Jet roared, showing us that he was ready.

“I’m going to summon a monster. Destroy it!”

“Hm. Got it.”

“Woof!”

Monster extermination. That was it? It seemed a little odd, but maybe we’d figure something out once we saw it...

“Get ready!” Lumina shouted.

The circle glowed as massive amounts of mana gathered in its center. Fran’s

hair flapped about in the powerful gusts of wind. She squinted at the concentration of mana. When the light subsided, a lone monster stood there.

“Huff...huff...” Lumina was doubled over.

You okay, Lumina?

“I’m all right... Worry not...”

No time to check that against Essence of Falsehood. We had to focus on the monster. This was Lumina’s test.

The thing looked humanoid and was pitch-black from the top of its head to the tip of its toes. We couldn’t see its body past the black miasma, but we could make out the fur covering it. It looked like some kind of Kobold, if Kobolds were a hundred times fiercer and more terrifying. The thing was stronger than the pillbug. Fran had to control her breathing, and it was just standing there!

“Grooooooar!”

“Ah...!”

The jet-black creature roared murderously, making Fran’s hair stand on end. Her reaction was similar to when she ran into the Beast King. This creature had a powerful aura—if she’d not had her chance encounter with the tyrant, she probably would have been overwhelmed. This beast was not to be trifled with.

Fran stood her ground in the midst of the pressure and looked the creature right in the eye. “Teacher, Jet... Let’s go!”

Right!

“Woof!”

“Grrrrr!”

“Haaaa!”

Fran charged, drawing me from my sheath as if to cut through the murderous air. We would pass Lumina’s test with flying colors.

Name: Corrupt Beastman Race: Fiend; Monster Level: 50

HP: 822; Magic: 927; Strength: 335; Agility: 1028

Skills: Evasion 9; Fang Arts 8; Fang Mastery 8; Presence Sense 9; Instant Regeneration 8; Blink 8; Magic Resistance 5; Enhanced Fur Class Skill: Awaken Lore: Unknown This thing...had Awaken?

“Destroy it,” Lumina whispered. “Absorb its crystal...”

I knew it! She’d summoned this so Fran could evolve!

It had taken a lot out of her. The beast was costly to summon, even for a Dungeon Master. She was as white as paper, her cheeks were sunken, and her skin had dried up. That was how far she was willing to go to prepare this test for Fran. Fran knew it, too, and she steeled herself for the fight.

“I’m going in, Teacher!”

Go for it!

She started slashing.

“Raaaaaargh!”

“Ungh!”

“Groar!”

“Urkl!”

This thing was fast! And it could heal itself as fast as it could move, too! It easily weaved between Fran’s attacks and countered her perfectly.

“Aaaaargh!” The monster let out another terrifying roar as it grew in size. Its fangs and claws grew longer and its stats jumped upward.

“Hrmph.”

It Awakened!

“So fast...!”

I can’t track this thing!

The Corrupt Beastman moved so fast that it was practically invisible. We defended ourselves as best we could with Presence Sense, but it gave us no room to counterattack. As if that weren’t bad enough, it kicked into even higher gear. Claws clanged against steel as the creature scratched at Fran over and

over.

“Urgh!”

Heal!

The beast was starting to wear her down. Fran couldn't strike back, lest she be torn to shreds. None of our enemies had been this fast. I didn't know how dangerous speed could be! Fran was still the superior swordsman, but the vast difference in speed made it impossible for her to respond.

We're going nowhere fast! I'm warping us in for an ambush!

“Hm!”

I teleported us to the creature's rear, but Presence Sense allowed it to react. It immediately moved in to exploit the gap in our defense. Hitting this thing with magic might be easier than melee. I didn't think it would be that effective, considering its Magic Resistance, but we had to try.

Take this!

I launched an Inferno Burst at the monster as Fran ducked under one of its swipes. The spell caught the creature off guard. A circle of flames consumed it, but the creature soon leaped out, damaged but not dead. The spell worked better than fighting it head-on, but its vast health and Magic Resistance kept it alive. Instant Regeneration would soon recover whatever health it had lost.

“This thing's dangerous.”

You can say that again. We have to kill it in one hit.

“Hm.”

A one-hit kill was the only way of nullifying its regeneration. We formed a plan. Jet and I would distract the creature as Fran prepared to attack at full force. She looked for an opening where she could counter the creature with a Pressurized Quickdraw. Jet clamped on to the thing's ankle as it tried to dodge, and I held it in place with a fully charged Telekinesis.

We had to kill this thing in one strike, durability be damned! I put all of my mana into my skills, bowing under the weight of multiple Elemental Blades—Fran with her Thunder, and me with Flame and Storm.

Come oooooon!

“Tssshhh!”

“Graooooorh!”

The beast tried to get away, but it was too late. I cut it in half, starting from the tip of its head down to its groin. I felt the sensation of slicing crystal as I slashed its heart in two.

“Gwaaaooo—”

Multiple Elemental Blades took their toll on me, knocking my durability down by a good eighty percent. Cracks spiderwebbed up my blade as it threatened to shatter.

But we held. The creature’s corpse lay on the ground, split in half. The fight had left us in tatters, but we’d won.

That didn’t matter as much as the skill we just got. I frantically looked for it in my Skill Memory.

Where is it...there!

Awaken. The signature skill of evolved beastmen. And it was right there in my skill list.

Fran...!

“How’d it go, Teacher?” Fran asked, worried.

I answered her, trying my best to maintain my calm. *We got it.*

“Hm...! Really?”

Yes, really.

We were ecstatic, but the anxiety was even greater. Had we really just obtained the Awaken skill? What would happen if Fran equipped it? Would she really evolve? Was it all that simple...?

“Teacher?”

Oh, sorry.

Only one way to find out. We certainly weren’t going to leave it in storage.

I'll equip Awaken now.

"Please." Fran gripped me tight in her right hand without consciously thinking about it. The scene looked like it was plucked right out of a fairy tale. I equipped Awaken, keeping watch.

It's on now. Feel anything different? I asked, trying to control myself.

"Hm...I can use it. I know."

I see.

What would happen to Fran when she used it...?

"Huff...hmm..." Fran closed her eyes and controlled her breathing, concentrating on the skill. I looked on quietly. "Hm! Here I go!" She opened her eyes and invoked the skill's name. "Awaken!"

Here it comes!

I didn't know what it was, but it sure was coming! An overwhelming amount of mana burst out of her. The overflow poured out, shooting upwards and creating a kind of pillar.

Whoa!

"Woof!"

Black lightning bolts ran throughout the room. We had to seek shelter from the storm. The bolts hit me and Jet, dealing a significant amount of damage. Was Fran okay in the middle of that thing?

Fran, are you all right?!

"Arf, arf!" Jet barked.

No response. Did she lose control?

Fortunately, my worries proved to be for naught. Fran's ears and tail stood on end as the mana settled down. Her tail was striped now—black with a light gray. The pattern was subtle, highlighted by the glow of mana.



Fran?

“Ungh...” Fran was crying. Tears rolled freely down her face. Emotions and memories raced through her. The dream of her race had become a reality.

I floated over to Fran as she choked through her tears. I did what I could with Telekinesis to approximate a consoling stroke on her back. She fell on her knees, crying harder as she tightened her grip on my hilt.

“Uhhh...sniff...”

I felt her warmth and heartbeat as she pressed her cheek against the flat of my blade. I felt her shiver and sigh. I wanted to cry too, despite not having eyes. Jet drew closer, and even his eyes welled up with tears.

“Arf...”

“Sniff...waaah...”

Ten minutes later, Fran stopped crying and stood up, rubbing her eyes. She smiled and fluffed Jet’s head, trying to hide her embarrassment. “Sorry about that.”

No need. That was a very big deal.

“Thanks.”

Let’s check it again just to be sure.

“Hm!” Fran gave a small jump of excitement. She closed and opened her left hand to assess the difference.

Well?

“Hmm...I’m stronger now.”

You don’t look too different, so let’s check your stats... What the heck?!

The boost she’d gained was quite a shock. Her Agility and Magic were up by three hundred points and her health and mana were completely topped up. She’d also acquired the Class Skill Flashing Thunderclap.

All this from Awaken? Was she evolved now? I thought Awaken was something you got after Evolution, not before.

This Evolution thing is potent stuff...hm?

I looked at Fran's stats again. Lumina was a Black Tiger, if memory served, so I thought Fran would follow in her footsteps...

Fran...you're a Black Sky Tiger for some reason.

That made her a member of one of the Ten Tribes—a race as legendary as the Beast King.

How'd that happen...?

"..."

Fran?

"..."

Uhh, Fran? Jet?

"..."

"..."

The two of them had stopped moving completely. What was going on? It looked like someone had stopped time.

What's going on here?

Darkness came over me, only adding to my confusion. The complete blackout had no shape I could make out. Did something happen to my vision? What was happening? Were Fran and Jet alright?

"Don't worry. I merely manipulated the flow of time and stopped everything aside from you."

A woman's voice, neither Fran's nor Lumina's. It was loud—not because of its volume, but because of its proximity. It sounded like she was talking right in my ear...

What? Who's there?

"I didn't think she could evolve that way... That was some stunt you pulled."

Excuse me?

Who was she? What was she? More importantly, had I angered her?

“You meeting the Black Cat girl was nothing short of a miracle. I didn’t expect the two of you to come this far...” the voice said.

A bright light shone in the pitch-black darkness, and a woman emerged from the shaft of radiance. She was heartbreakingly beautiful. Her silver hair glistened with a mysterious opalescence. Her brown skin radiated purity and health. She was well-endowed and her robes flowed elegantly, complimenting her curves, but the effect wasn’t sexual or voluptuous. She glowed with divine light.

And you are...?

“I am she who maintains the order of the world. You may know me as the Goddess of Chaos.”

Come again?

I stared at the self-proclaimed Goddess of Chaos. How was I supposed to take her seriously? The Goddess of Chaos was one of the Ten Gods, the creator of dungeons. Powerful, if not almighty.

Then again, she *was* stopping time. Only a god could pull that off.

The woman smiled, though it did nothing to reassure me. She reeked of trouble!

“How rude. I certainly do not reek, thank you very much.”

What? D-did she just read my thoughts?

“Yes.”

I-I’m so sorry.

Oh no! The last thing I wanted to do was piss off a god! No, sorry! I respect you, I really do! I’m just overwhelmed by your beauty, dear goddess, that’s all! Please, have mercy on me! If I had a body, I would fall on my face right now!

“Ha ha ha. We gods have no need for vain words. I can see right into your soul.”

Uhhh, I...

“Your lack of respect for the gods makes you a rare creature, indeed.”

I-I respect you. Honest!

“Oh, I don’t mind. I am not so petty as to let such a small slight wound me.”

S-so are you going to punish me for being disrespectful, or...

“Perish the thought.”

Th-thank god! I’d been terrified since I found out about the punishment the gods gave the Black Cat tribe!

“I have taken on a more frightening form in the past. But this form is more palatable to your kind. I’m not even used to speaking in such a loose manner. Apologies if I don’t look or sound more divine.”

Was the woman standing in front of me only a part of the goddess? I’d heard of divine encounters back on Earth. At best, they blinded you. At worst, they drove you insane. *Thank you so much for making yourself look like something I can bear!*

“Enough of that. We have no need for the faith of an outsider.”

What? So you know that I came from another world?

“Of course. But let’s set that aside for now. We have more pressing matters.” The smile disappeared from the goddess’ face, heightening my tension. I think I knew the reason she was here.

It’s about Fran’s Evolution, isn’t it?

“Yes.”

The presence of the goddess settled any doubt about the origin of the Black Cat’s curse. The gods had indeed punished them.

“Precisely. The Black Cat tribe committed a grave sin. One so grave as to earn a heavy penance.”

And I helped Fran get around that restriction...

“You get right to the point. Honestly, I didn’t expect anyone to evolve in that manner. And now, we move on to the problem.”

I knew we hadn’t exactly gone through the proper channels, but the gods didn’t have to come down on us! Was she going to— “Rest easy. I am not going

to do anything to the girl. I will not nullify her act of Evolution.”

I heaved a sigh of relief. I was still in the thick of it, but at least the worst wouldn’t happen.

“Do you know the trouble you’ve caused?”

I helped Fran evolve in an improper way?

“That isn’t the only problem.”

Wait, really?

“Yes. I wouldn’t have needed to come down here myself for that.”

Well, what was the problem then?

“Your roundabout way of Evolution is not without consequence. You ignored the logic of this world.”

The logic of the world?

“Yes. Think of it like the systems and programs you had back on Earth.”

Did that mean the Goddess of Chaos was a system administrator, in a way? My P.A. might be related to her.

“Normally, a beastman acquires the Awaken skill upon maxing out his level. Using the skill awakens the latent power in his blood, eventually resulting in Evolution. However, a curse has been placed on the Black Cat tribe to prevent them from acquiring Awaken, even if they hit max level. You’ve seen this firsthand.”

That’s what happened with Fran.

“Now, the girl sidestepped the curse and found an alternate way to acquire Awaken, and then evolved anyway. Perhaps it is the latent power of the Black Cat tribe that allowed her to evolve after a single use of Awaken, but regardless, this opens up the possibility of something similar happening again.”

I see. Equipping me would be enough to make anyone evolve...

“Precisely my point. Any beastman at any level could evolve by simply equipping you. I will not allow the laws of the world to be broken in such a way. Besides, the penance of the Black Cat tribe would have no meaning if anyone

could pick you up and evolve,” the goddess said, staring at me intently.

Wait, was I the one on trial here? Was my existence about to be...cancelled? Please, say it ain't so!

I returned the goddess' gaze with anxiety. She pointed her finger at me.

“There are two ways for a Black Cat to bypass the restriction that we have placed on their tribe.”

W-wait, was I safe? Was she just leading me on? Which one was it?!

“Will you please calm down? I have no intention of destroying you.”

Oh, thank you! Thank you so much!

“If you will let me finish. The first method involves lifting the curse on an individual. A Black Cat must kill a thousand Fiends or a single A-Threat Fiend. The curse would immediately be lifted, and that individual would be able to evolve.”

Uh, was she allowed to tell me these things? She'd gone to the trouble of wiping Lumina's memories and restricting her speech. It seemed odd that she would give me all this information so readily.

“Because the girl has already evolved, regardless of how she achieved it, the restrictions on Lumina no longer apply. She will tell you later, so I might as well tell you now.”

I...guess?

But Jet and I weren't Black Cats. If we were restricted in speech, wouldn't that be the same as putting a gag on Fran? I couldn't imagine Fran asking me and Jet to leave so she and Lumina could talk. I hoped the gods would forget about that so we could all talk like normal people.

“Familiars and summons are not subject to this. And you are one of my vassals, which makes you an exception.”

Right, she could read my thoughts... Wait, did she just say I was her vassal? That sounded very important.

Excuse me? I'm your vassal?

“One of my vassals, if we’re being accurate.”

T-tell me more!

“No. We are talking about Evolution.”

Dang it.

“The other method breaks the curse for all members of the Black Cat tribe. The tribe must band together to defeat an S-Threat Fiend or a vassal of the Evil One. Accomplish that, and the sins of the tribe will be forgiven, and they will be accepted back into the Ten Tribes.”

Lifting the tribal curse as a whole seemed almost impossible. An S-Threat monster was a world-ending cataclysm. For the Black Cats to kill such an entity by themselves...

“It goes to show you the gravity of the sin they committed.”

I’ve been hearing about this sin a lot, but what was it, exactly?

“It goes back to the Black Cat Elder at the time, who was also the Beast King. They broke the seal on the Evil One to absorb his power into their bloodline. It worked...half the time.”

Absorb his power? How was that different from becoming Fiends?

“It was much worse, for starters. Part of the royal family evolved into half-Fiend, half-beastman creatures. Half of them succeeded in getting stronger, though most of them went berserk and were killed by their brethren. We could not allow the powers of the Evil One to be used for personal gain. We eliminated the royal family and those who obtained his power, and took Evolution from the remaining Black Cats.”

That...was a lot worse than I expected! Using the Evil One’s powers to become demigods was like picking a fight with the gods themselves.

“We had made it clear that using the Evil One’s powers for personal gain would not go unpunished.”

And the Black Cat King had ignored this commandment. No wonder the gods were furious.

Now I know how serious their crime is.

“But with you, any Black Cat can evolve without so much as thinking about penance.” She didn’t glare at me, but her words stung. “Evolution is the lost dream of the Black Cats. But evolving in an improper way, without paying for their sins, will only lead to an even greater sin. One that might lead in turn to an even greater punishment.”

Dare I ask for an example...?

“Extinction of the whole species,” the goddess said frankly.

B-but— “I said it might, which means it might not. Even so, try to understand the gravity of your actions.”

Y-yes, ma’am.

Her brief statement struck the fear of the gods into me. I wondered again if my life was in danger.

S-so what should I do now? I swear I won’t let anyone other than Fran use Awaken. You have my word!

“And you speak truly. Even so, it is too weak to be a guarantee. I cannot allow the existence of manatech which lets its users evolve at no cost.”

Oh no...I knew it...

“Calm down. Like I said earlier, I have no intention of destroying you. I will not do anything so violent as that.”

I-I see! That was the closest shave I’d had since coming to this world!

“Let me get to the point—”

Snap.

Huh? What just...?

My blade glowed in the brief moment the Goddess of Chaos snapped her fingers. What did she just do?

“I’ve locked your User Registration.”

My User Registration?

“Yes. You are permanently linked to your current user until death, and cannot be used by anyone else. Should anyone attempt to use you, they will receive divine punishment.”

Like what?

“Accidental touches and test swings will warrant a small thunderbolt. Should they choose to ignore my warnings... Let’s just say I have forces more fatal than thunderbolts at my disposal.”

Fatal. Death. Got it. I didn’t think I needed the divine anti-theft protocol though, since Fran was the only one I wanted to serve.

“I’ve also taken Awaken from you, just in case. And you won’t be able to acquire it again, should the opportunity ever present itself.”

Harsh, but I didn’t mind. It’s not like I was about to argue with this goddess, or any god for that matter. Shame I never got to use Awaken for myself.

“Awaken is a skill which unlocks the latent power of beastmen. Nothing would happen if you used it.”

Oh, I see. But Fran already has Awaken, right?

“Yes.”

Then I have no use for it. Take it away, beautiful goddess.

“I’ve placed a new restriction on Lumina which prohibits her from summoning creatures that possess Awaken. Though, given the cost of summoning such a creature, it’ll be a few hundred years before she can pull that stunt off again.”

Was the summoning why Lumina acted so strangely?

“Yes. I’ve placed many restrictions on my dear vassal because of her love for her tribe. You know of the speech restriction, but there are others. For example, she cannot create an item which possesses the Awaken skill. Also, she would die if she were to use her dungeon to create a situation where Black Cats could fulfill their penance.”

What? Seriously? Then Lumina— “Don’t worry, she’s not dead.”

But Fran evolved.

“In a very roundabout way. Lumina did not directly cause her Evolution. That was your fault. Lumina exhausted much of her energy, but her actions do not warrant death.”

Thank god for that. Fran would never forgive herself.

“Still, I cannot allow the same thing to happen again. Thus, the new restrictions.”

Lumina had been prepared to have Fran kill her to evolve. The Dungeon Master would’ve turned into an A-Threat Fiend if she had allowed herself to be taken over by malice. Fran would be completely justified in putting her down.

No wonder Lumina had tried so hard to push her away.

“Correct. Lumina would be dead if not for you.” The goddess confirmed my suspicions. “I thank you for that. Now, it isn’t fair of me to simply take a skill from you, so let me give you another in its place.” The goddess snapped her fingers again, wrapping my blade in a familiar radiance. What just happened? I took a look at my stats.

So...what’s this Stealth Evolution?

“As its name implies, it allows you to hide your Evolution, especially from other beastmen.”

A handy skill. There might be riots on the streets if beastmen found out that a Black Cat had managed to evolve. It was an Extra skill, too. There was one thing about the gift that caught my eye, however.

Umm, the leftover EP I had is completely gone.

“Only because you’ve made such a mess of things. It was the least I could do to restore balance. You’re coming out ahead in this transaction. Trust me.”

Sorry about that.

No use looking a gift horse in the mouth. Complaining would only irritate her. With a satisfied nod, the goddess floated upwards, becoming more transparent with every inch.

“Oh,” she said. “One more thing. I have allowed you to tell the world about the conditions of Evolution. We had planned for this, as long as one Black Cat

managed to evolve. Even if the methods were slightly crooked.”

The goddess was fading fast. I shouted a question before she could go.

Tell me! What am I? You said I was your vassal. Do you know of my origins?

I couldn't help myself. She was the first person I'd met who had a chance of knowing my identity. The goddess looked thoughtful.

“You see...it's not my place to tell you who you are. But I'll give you a clue. Find the Godsmith in the Beastman Nation.”

There's a Godsmith there?

I remembered Old Garrus, the one who made Fran's Black Cat set, saying that the whereabouts of the Godsmiths was a mystery. Had the Beast King managed to kidnap him? Heading there would be a difficult journey. It was enemy territory, not to mention on a different continent. Endangering Fran for my own purposes was the last thing I wanted to do.

“You never know until you ask. Even then you might come up empty.”

You don't know what's going to happen?

“Of course not. The gods are as much in the dark as you are.”

But you're supposed to be gods. How can you not know the future...?

“Because we don't. You mortals assume that because the gods are stronger, we have infinite power. We don't, despite what humans say about the good and bad things that befall them.”

I'd met those people. Honestly, even I thought my encounter with Fran was something like fate.

“Would I really bother to appear before you to fix this problem if everything in the world happened the way the gods wanted?”

I guess not.

“Fate does not exist in this world; just an overlap in coincidences. You are responsible for the bad things that happen in your life, and you only have yourself to thank for the good things. That's all it is.”

Which meant my encounter with Fran was one such chance encounter.

“Indeed. You and the Black Cat met by chance. You were also suited to each other by chance. But that you would cooperate with each other to this point... I daresay that is a miracle.”

I blushed at the goddess’ compliment.

“I have said too much. Know that the Goddess of Chaos expects a great deal from you both.”

I didn’t know how to feel about that.

“Ha ha ha. How indeed? In any case, you are free to search for or ignore the Godsmith. I recommend seeking him out. It would make for better entertainment.”

Wait!

“May you have a chaotic day.”

With that strange benediction, the goddess vanished into the abyss.

We still need to talk about the curse!

“Curse?” Fran asked. “What curse?”

Huh, I’m back... Some stuff happened just now...

Lumina approached Fran before I could answer. “You’ve...evolved...” She stared at Fran. Her eyes were red with happy tears.

“Thanks.”

“Even so...this is—” Lumina fell silent. She examined Fran from the tip of her ears to her fingernails. “No... did you...? You’re a Black Sky Tiger!”

I didn’t know what the big deal was, but the Black Sky Tiger was legendary among beastmen. Lumina herself was a mere Black Tiger. She gazed at Fran with respect. The Black Sky Tiger Evolution was definitely a bigger deal than I thought.

What are the requirements to turn into a Black Sky Tiger?

“Hm? It looks like I can tell you, now that Fran has evolved.” The goddess had made good on her word. “Thunder Magic, along with sufficient Agility and Magic.”

Fran met those criteria as long as she equipped me. Then again, Skill Sharing allowed my skills to be her skills, to the point that they could be used for special Evolution.

“I didn’t think you could fulfill these requirements, even with Teacher’s help. You might be the first Black Sky Tiger outside the royal family.”

Okay, that’s impressive.

“Indeed. It is a miracle that Fran managed to meet you.”

You know, the goddess said the same thing.

Lumina’s eyes went wide in shock. “The goddess said...? Did you meet her?!”

“What happened, Teacher?” Fran asked.

“Yes! What happened?”

I told them everything as Fran and Lumina crowded over me. Lumina’s excitement was palpable, but she didn’t look like she held any resentment for the goddess. I thought she would’ve hated the gods for cursing her tribe...but I suppose they brought the curse upon themselves.

Lumina scrunched up her face when I asked about that. “I am not without resentment...but the minds of the gods can see further than man’s.”

There were gods who were fundamentally different from humanity, such as the nature gods. The punishment these gods dealt was inevitably inhuman. I had heard similar tales back on Earth, and it was magnified here, where the gods were unambiguously real. Their vast minds were too much for humanity to grasp.

“More to the point,” said Lumina. “The Goddess of Chaos is among the more humane.”

She is?

“She was the one who took away the Evolution of the Black Cats and wiped the memory of their crime and their curse from the other races.”

I don’t see how that’s supposed to be merciful.

“But it is.”

While the other gods were calling for the extinction of the Black Cat tribe, the Goddess of Chaos insisted on the lighter punishment of removing Evolution. Harsh as her punishment was, it was better than being wiped out.

Why wasn't that knowledge passed on to the current generation of Black Cats?

"Because of the Blue Cats and the new royal family. They destroyed the chronicles of our Evolution, enslaved the Black Cat tribe, and forbade anyone from talking about Black Cat Evolution. The knowledge of the conditions was never passed down, and the new generation eventually forgot that they could evolve at all."

The gods might have instigated their divine punishment, but the reigning royal family and the Blue Cats made the situation worse.

That doesn't change the fact that the gods were the one who punished you. Don't you resent them for letting the Black Cats be enslaved?

Fran looked at the floor. "I didn't know."

This was the first time she had heard the reason her tribe could not evolve, and she was conflicted. The Black Cats were partly to blame for committing such a great sin, but it was understandable she might resent the gods for burdening her with a debt she hadn't directly incurred.

Lumina shook her head. "It's a miracle that the Black Cats were allowed to exist after unleashing the power of the Evil One. The gods sealed him away for a reason, and the Black Cats endangered all living things. Remember that it has only been five hundred years."

The world could've ended five hundred years ago. To an elf, that was a short time.

"Besides, the usurpation and slavery of the Black Cats were only the fallout of our transgression. If our rulers had been kind and just, the other beast tribes would've come to our aid. I am ashamed that our children have to bear the burden of our sin...but I do not resent the gods for what they did."

If anything, Lumina felt indebted to the Goddess of Chaos for preventing the extinction of her race.

I told Lumina and Fran about the rest of my conversation with the goddess, although Lumina already knew most of the information. I skipped the part where the goddess took away Awaken, and talked about Evolution instead.

We've beaten an A-Threat Fiend before, but...

Linford of Bulbola was at least an A-Threat, so why didn't Fran evolve?

"Did you do it alone?"

"We had help from other adventurers."

"There's the problem. To break the curse, you must defeat an A-Threat Fiend entirely on your own."

Fran needed to solo the thing. Lumina suddenly bowed her head.

"I apologize."

"Hm?"

"I used to be an advisor to the royal family. I was dismissed after failing to convince the king to refrain from his crimes. I became an adventurer, came to this land, and eventually became a Dungeon Master."

"But it's not your fault."

"We wouldn't be in this situation if I had stopped them!"

Lumina had been carrying this burden for five hundred years. The Black Cat tribe might not be in such a sorry state if she had stopped them. She blamed herself more than she did the gods, which was why she put her life on the line to help Fran evolve. She enjoyed Fran's company, but more than that, I think she was looking for a chance to atone.

"I put your life in grave danger..." She knew that the gods might have punished Fran for the things that she had done. She turned pale and bowed her head.

"It's not your fault, Lumina."

"I wasn't thinking." Her expression was grim. "I care not for my own destruction. But if anything were to happen to you, even death would be insufficient penance!"

“Lumina, please don’t die.” Fran looked at her with sorrowful eyes. She had almost lost Lumina once already.

“But it’s the least I can do to make up for the things I’ve done...”

“You don’t have to do anything.”

“But—”

“Just be there for me,” Fran said quietly.

She wrapped her arms around Lumina and hugged her. Lumina looked down on her with bewilderment, but eventually started stroking Fran’s back.

“Kiara said the same thing. You’re so much like her.”

“Hm.”

“And I haven’t changed at all in fifty years.”

They settled down in a sort of awkward silence. Fran wasn’t used to asking for affection, and Lumina didn’t know what to do, either. Exhaustion soon took over. Lumina collapsed into her chair and stretched.

How are you feeling, Lumina? Better?

The goddess said she had expended a large amount of energy. Did she go beyond her limits?

“I’ll recover. I used up all my reserves of energy as a Dungeon Master...but I’ll make do.” The Dungeon would be easier to complete now, but with Dias’ influence, she didn’t have to worry about getting accidentally exterminated. “I’m more worried about you. The skill the goddess gave you should allow you to conceal your Evolution, but still...”

What’s on your mind? The gods?

“I’m not as worried about divinity as I am about flesh and bone. Beastmen, in particular. The Beast King and the Blue Cats will target you if word of the Evolution requirements gets out.”

True. We couldn’t go announcing it willy-nilly. We needed to be careful. Maybe if we found someone with channels to the Black Cat tribe...

Is there a community of Black Cats anywhere?

“There should be some in the Beastman Nation, although they mostly live in ghettos...”

The Beastman Nation again. We should think about going there, especially in light of the Godsmith...but the Beast King was too dangerous to cross.

“You said there was a Godsmith there. Do you have any plans?”

No. It's far too dangerous.

“But we might find out where you came from.”

Yeah, “might”. We don't know for sure, and I'm not about to put your life in danger on a hunch.

“But!”

It's all right. It's not the only option available to us. There are other ways of getting word of the Black Cats' Evolution requirements out there.

“Hm...”

I'd be lying if I said the decision didn't come with its own regrets. Still, the Beastman Nation was far too dangerous.

Or at least, I'd thought it was back then.

Soon after the first round, we found that the Beast King wasn't our enemy, after all. In fact, he was downright chummy with the Black Cats, and was in the process of breaking their chains.

Lumina broke down and cried when we told her that Kiara was alive and well. The guilt lifted from her shoulders and brought her to her knees. She pulled Fran into an embrace, burying her face in Fran's shoulder to suppress her sobs, and cried until she was spent.

“I apologize. That was overwhelming.”

Good to see you're taking it well.

“Thank you. That was the best news I've heard in five hundred years.”

Lumina smiled. She still bore the burden of the tribal curse, but at least her guilt about Kiara was absolved.

“This will make it easier for you to broadcast the Evolution requirements.”

“Hm.”

We had already told Aurel, and the old wolf said he would get the word out to the Black Cats through his beastman network. This continent was taken care of, at least.

“You can freely enter the Beastman Nation now.”

Yeah. The Beast King might know the whereabouts of the Godsmith. The legendary figure would be hard to ignore. He might be hiding out somewhere in that foreign land.

“You only have to win the third round to receive an audience with the king.”

“We got it. We’ll win and ask him everything about the Black Cat tribe and Kiara. I’ll ask for permission to enter the Beastman Nation while we’re at it.”

“May I ask you to send a gift to Kiara?”

“Sure.”

You didn’t need to ask.

Next stop: the Beastman Nation. We had the third round to win, but I was feeling optimistic. With Fran’s Evolution, we could take on Rigdith himself if push came to shove. The Class Skill Flashing Thunderclap was tremendously powerful. It was a risky move which ate at its user’s life and mana, but it would allow Fran to move at the speed of an A-Rank.

Black Lightning was a force to be reckoned with, too. It endowed Fran with penetrative abilities and struck everything in its wake as long as she kept her focus. The Thunder element easily ignored metal armor, and it was destructive enough that leather and shell wouldn’t be a problem, either. It had gravely injured a High Ogre with one strike.

“Our immediate goal is winning the third round.”

But our final goal is— “Complete victory!”

Yeah! Let’s win and brag about it to Kiara!

“Hm!”

A quiet fire burned in Fran’s heart, fueled by a new resolve.

Chapter 6:

Insurmountable Wall **T**HE BEAST KING summoned Fran to the VIP room immediately after our match with Gaudartha. She could have refused, but he'd said the magic words: "Refreshments will be provided." I wondered how he guessed Fran's one weakness, but perhaps it was one all beastmen shared.

The beautiful room was located on the highest floor of the colosseum. The sofa looked expensive, and the carpets and curtains were glamorous, bordering on ostentatious. At the end of the room was a balcony overlooking the stadium.

"Hey. You made it." The Beast King greeted her with a friendly welcome. Rosch was there, too, standing by his side.

"Hm. What's up?"

"Well, I wanted to meet the legendary Black Sky Tiger in person. Never seen one before."

Just as I thought. The beastmen we passed on our way here had stared silently at Fran. Now the Beast King was examining her. He raised his eyebrows.

"Yep, I can't tell that you've evolved...I knew it wasn't a distance thing."

"I agree," said Rosch. "She looks like a regular Black Cat."

"But you saw it, didn't you?"

"That I did."

Rosch was right next to the Beast King, and he couldn't distinguish any signs of Fran's Evolution, either. Stealth Evolution was working its magic.

"Don't suppose you could just tell us the trick?"

"Your Highness! Manners!"

"I mean, come on!"

The beastmen were completely in the dark about Fran's Evolution. They probably felt like they were losing their minds. Telling them the whole story

would be asking for trouble, and it wouldn't hurt to keep a few secrets to ourselves.

Or so I thought.

"Sure, I don't mind."

Fran!

I have a plan. Fran was confident in the face of my panic.

Can you share your plan with me?

I got this.

Sure, but...

Don't worry.

Well, if she insisted.

"On one condition."

"Yeah? Shoot."

"I'm looking for a Godsmith. Do you know where I can find one?"

I see. The Godsmith might be hidden by the royal family themselves. Rigdith wouldn't give him up so easily, no matter how much he favored the Black Cats. Although, knowing him, he'd probably end up telling us anyway.

Teacher, Essence of Falsehood.

You got it.

This was how she planned to figure out the Godsmith's whereabouts. We would find out something about him, whether the Beast King lied or told the truth.

"What do you think?" Rigdith asked Rosch.

"I...defer to Your Majesty's wisdom on the matter."

"Hey, no fair! Help me out here. Royce is gonna yell at me if I mess up."

"I am a mere bodyguard."

"If you were, you wouldn't be calling me 'muscle-head' and 'dumbass' all the

time!”

Rosch was the Beast King’s bodyguard, but he also felt like a glorified babysitter. His superior was Royce, who was taking part in the tournament today. Rigdith consulted him for a while before finally coming to a decision.

“Get over here.”

“Hm.”

The Beast King signaled for Fran to come closer. She leaned in, and Rigdith whispered into her cat ear. “There’s one in our kingdom.”

Good news. My only problem was that he was getting a little too close for comfort. Chapped lips would be the least of his problems if they brushed against Fran’s ears.

“Really?” Fran asked.

The Beast King kept feeding Fran information, unaware of my dark thoughts. “Yeah. Doesn’t like being bothered, though. Tough character to meet.”

“Just tell me where he is.”

“That one respects my office even less than you do. Well, come over and I’ll write you a personal introduction.”

“You don’t mind?”

“As long as you tell me your secret.”

“Sure. I’m using a skill.” Fran told them about Stealth Evolution.

“Stealth Evolution...never heard of it.”

“But it does explain how she can conceal her form.”

Neither of them had heard of the skill before, which led them to think that it was exclusive to Black Sky Tigers. The two had yet to wrap their minds around Fran’s Evolution.

Teacher?

He’s telling the truth. He knows where the Godsmith is and he fully intends to introduce you.

So we need to visit the Beastman Nation.

Sounds like it.

“Sorry to leave you out of the discussion after you came all the way here to see us.” Rosch apologized, mistaking Fran’s conversation with me for silence.

“No problem. Can I go now?”

“Yes. That is all we wanted to ask. Thank you for the valuable information.”

“Hm.”

“If you don’t mind, we would love to continue this conversation once things settle down.”

“Sure.” Details would have to wait until after the tournament.

“Thank you so much. These are for you. They’re not much, but it’s the least we can do after calling you here.”

“What’s this?” Fran took the two tickets from Rosch.

“These are tickets for the assigned seats. You’re going to watch the fights after this, right?”

“You’re famous now,” said the Beast King. “People will spot you in the stands as soon as they see you. They’ll swarm all over you.”

“Which is why you should use these. They are a safe distance away from the stands, and no one will try and talk to you there.”

“Thanks. But why two?”

“The other one’s for your familiar. Consider it a reward for locking down Godo so well.” The Beast King smiled as he remembered Jet’s fight.

“Imagine my surprise when His Majesty insisted that the wolf get a ticket.”

“Sorry,” Fran said.

“Oh, it’s not your fault. My foolish king is to blame.”

“Why are you putting this one on me?!”

“Because it’s your fault. But seriously, it’s not like anyone’s losing out from this transaction. I trust that you will entertain Lord Solberd.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

The Beast King had bought the tickets off a beastman aristocrat who had come to the tournament for a good old-fashioned brawl. The noble wasn't one to hold grudges against his liege, especially when the Beast King had invited him to the VIP room to watch the fights. It was a perfect chance to curry favor.

“We figured you wouldn't want to watch the fights from here.”

“Hm.”

The passage leading to the assigned seats was spacious. The other guests saw Fran, but no one attempted to talk to her, probably because they were afraid of the direwolf at her side. I didn't blame them. Jet's tail stood at the ready, his face fixed with excitement for the coming match. Adrenaline coursed through Fran's blood, making her look more intimidating than usual. I didn't think a civilian would dare approach them. I enjoyed the privacy, so I let Jet play guard dog today.

Match still hasn't started.

“Hm.”

“Woof.”

Perhaps it was because we'd blown up the arena. They were still in the middle of fixing the ring with Earth Magic. Maintenance mages were in the process of drawing out a magic circle. Twenty minutes went by before a new arena was formed and the combatants entered. Fran had finished her meal and was prepared to watch the battle.

The second match of the day was Amanda versus Elza.

“It's been a while, Elza.”

“Oh, yes. You look beautiful as ever...”

Amanda's confident smile earned a dreamy look from Elza. Her eyes were those of a maiden in love, and I remembered Dias saying that Elza was into both men and women.

“Ugh. I see you haven't changed, either,” Amanda said.

“I love those cold eyes of yours! You’re slaying me!”

The air around Amanda started to grow heavy, and the match hadn’t even started. The two of them talked like they had known each other for ages. More importantly, who were we supposed to root for? The match began before I could decide.

“Haaaa!”

“Graaaah!”

“Too slow!”

“Speedy as usual, I see.”

Elza stood in place as Amanda pelted her with whiplashes, looking for a chance to counterattack. The fight was a spectacle to behold, with Amanda’s whip snaking around like a dragon and Elza’s mace leaving giant craters in the ground.

“Mmph!”

“Ooooh!”

“Aaahn!”

I was having second thoughts when Elza started moaning at the touch of the whip. This fight wasn’t exactly family-friendly, and I didn’t think Fran was ready for it, either. Unfortunately, we had to watch it to prepare for the battle tomorrow. I hoped the match would end soon, but Elza’s high defense value and Transmute Pain made that unlikely. Fortunately, Amanda’s strength pulled through.

“Just stay down!”

Rapid lashes weren’t enough to take her down. Amanda knew she would have to put more force into her strikes. She charged her mana, pulling her hand back for a second before lashing her whip. It snaked like a giant serpent towards Elza, too fast for her to activate her damage-reduction skills.

“Aaaahn!”

The whip hit Elza like a hammer, if the hammer was actually a log. She

moaned as she was sent flying, the whip striking her right in the solar plexus. The attack had done some serious damage, despite the pleasurable sounds she was making. She lay sprawled out on the ground, not moving an inch. A big enough hit would cut the brain's connection to the body, no matter how much damage mitigation she had.

"I can't believe it! Ulmutt's beloved hero has been defeated! Such an easy victory could only come from the A-Rank Adventurer, Amanda the Hariti!"

Only in Ulmutt could Elza be hailed as a local hero.

Did you see Amanda's last attack?

"Barely."

Me too.

The strike had happened so fast that the tip of Amanda's whip was invisible. Multiple hits would be impossible to evade. Fran had the same thought.

We're in for a tough fight.

"Hm!"

Amanda versus Elza was over. Fran took out a skewer from her Pocket Dimension and snacked on it as the ring was repaired. She examined the tournament roster.

"Next is Forlund and Phillip."

Forlund's going to take this one. Easy.

Phillip was at a clear disadvantage. I had seen both of them fight. Forlund was as big a monster as Amanda.

I just hope Phillip can last long enough to make Forlund take him seriously.

"Hm. Good luck, Phillip."

Unfortunately, Phillip was annihilated in under three minutes. Forlund unleashed his magic swords as soon as the match began and made a hedgehog out of the knight general, killing him instantly. Still, Phillip got what he wanted. Before the match started, he appealed Bulbola's plight to the crowd and asked for their support. The tournament was the perfect chance to appeal to the

aristocracy.

I guess Bulbola's still in a rough spot.

"Hm..."

The final match was the Dragonhead's owner Phelms versus the Beast King's elite guard Royce. Former A-Rank would face active A-Rank in the most exciting quarterfinal of the year.

"Here's to a good fight."

"Likewise."

The crowd had great expectations when they sensed the combatants' battle auras. The tension was palpable, and the fighters soon made good on their introduction. Fran and I got lost in the fight, completely forgetting that we were supposed to be analyzing them as they tried to kill each other.

Royce's basic strategy revolved around Dimension Door, teleporting to confuse his opponent and combining it with his agility as a rabbit beastman. He attacked with Land Magic. He was better at warping around the ring than I was, as much as it pained me to admit. At least I had a standard to aspire to with my feints now.

His Moonlight Magic countered his foe by reflecting their attacks back at them. He would feint to bait a counterattack, and counter that instead. Royce's battle plan was full of smoke and mirrors.

Phelms handled Royce's feints with a surprising strategy of his own.

Name: Phelms Age: 63

Race: Human Class: Wire Mage Level: 68/99

HP: 436; Magic: 669; Strength: 231; Agility: 412

Skills: Stealth 5; Disassemble 8; Flame Resistance 8; Wind Magic 3; Danger Sense 8; Presence Sense 8; Wire Arts 10; Wire Mastery 10; Bind 7; Gathering 6; Hush 6; Abnormal Status Resistance 6; Trade 5; Vibration Sense 8; Oscillation 6;

Dual Blade Mastery 8; Wire Manipulation 10; Dagger Mastery 3; Throw 9; Lasso 4; Create Mana Thread 7; Bestiary 3; Magic Resistance 5; Mana Sense 5;

Water Magic 6; Cooking 8; Disarm Trap 5; Trap Sense 5; Lay Trap 8; Enhanced Thread; Orc Killer; Spirit Manipulation; Pain Immunity; Split Thinking; Mana Manipulation Class Skill: Spool Unique Skill: Dragon Slaughterer Titles: Enemy of the Scaled Ones; Garrote User; Orc Killer; Dungeon Conqueror; Dragon Slaughterer; Mana Thread User; Monster Exterminator Equipment: King Baleen Battle Wire; Dragon-Eater Spider Thread; Thunder Dragon Fang Dagger; Dragonscale Battle Shirt; Dragonwing Cloak; Bracelet of Poison Immunity; Earrings of Scent Removal I expected him to fight with wires, given his stats...but I didn't expect his strange weapon to be so useful. At most, I thought he would use his threads as an extension of his fingers, but it looked like he was controlling over a hundred of them. He chased Royce down by manipulating his threads, transforming them into swords, walls, and nets as necessary. He set up tripwires around the ring so he knew where Royce was at all times.

Phelms got hit, of course. His wires couldn't stop a high-speed boulder, and he was at a disadvantage at melee range. Then there was the matter of Royce's superior physical prowess.

Still, escaping Phelms' threads in a confined space proved difficult. Eventually, they caught up to Royce and tore him to shreds.

"Your winner: Dragon Hunter Phelms! He may be retired, but the three-time hall-of-famer proves that he's still got the moves!"

Phelms waved to the audience and thanked them with a bow. His honesty stopped the gesture from being condescending. The old man was no ordinary dandy. He could still hunt down dragons for ingredients if he wanted to.

He's strong.

"Hm," Fran said.

How do you fight him in such a tight space...?

"Can't run."

Yeah.

The semifinals were decided. First up tomorrow was Fran versus Amanda, followed by Forlund versus Phelms.

Let's just worry about beating Amanda for now.

"Hm."

Despite her love for children, Amanda didn't hold back the last time we sparred. She respected Fran too much to go easy on her.

I never thought the day would come where we would fight Amanda again.

I wasn't sure we could beat her, even if we had already defeated Gaudartha, who was at least as strong. I couldn't shake my impression that Amanda was overwhelmingly powerful, probably because we fought her at an early stage of our travels. Fran was having none of it.

"We're going to win."

I know. Our goal's the gold.

"Hm!"

"Arf arf!" Jet barked, not wanting to be forgotten. The other spectators left as we thought about tomorrow's match.

"Let's do our best, Jet."

"Hm. Let's go see Elza."

Sure.

Elza had been kind to us during our stay in Ulmutt. It would do us no harm to visit her after her spectacular defeat. An official told us that she was sleeping in one of the infirmaries. The muscular fighter was still out cold, snoozing peacefully in a king-sized bed. And yet, she looked happy.

"Unngh..." Elza muttered in her sleep. "Mmph. Tee hee." A line of drool dripped from the corner of her disconcerting smile.

You doing okay, Fran? This doesn't gross you out or anything?

"Why should it?"

Just checking to see how you're holding up.

"Should we wake her up?"

She looks fine. Let's leave her be.

“Okay.”

“Hee hee heh...”

With that, we left Elza and returned to our lodgings. *Sweet dreams, beloved hero of Ulmutt.*

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen! I hope you’re as excited as I am for the semifinals! Up first, we have a battle between two beautiful belles!”

I was getting used to the roar of the crowd, but they burst into louder applause when Fran entered the ring.

“Winner gets to go to the grand finals! Loser has to fight for third place!”

Let’s go, Fran.

“Hm!”

Fran was already fully buffed and Awakened. It would last for about an hour, so long as she didn’t use Flashing Thunderclap. The fight would be long over before then.

“Making her way into the arena is this year’s eye of the storm! This C-Rank adventurer has defeated all your favorites, even an A-Rank! The Swordceress, the Princess of Black Lightning...Fran!”

Princess of Black Lightning? I like the sound of that! Thanks, commentator!

“Now, this A-Rank has dominated all of her matches so far! Her beauty matches that of Hundred Blade Forlund, and she is the finest our kingdom has to offer...Amanda the Hariti!”

The crowd applauded Amanda slightly louder than they had Fran. And they’d fully supported Fran when she had gone up against Gaudartha, too... Wild beast versus little girl was an easier choice, I guess. Meanwhile, the beauty of a half-elf was not to be trifled with. Even the girls were screaming, their high-pitched voices cutting through the baritone of the crowd. They shouted, hoping their lady would turn their way.

Amanda paid them no attention and addressed Fran with a calm look. “I didn’t think I’d see you here so soon, Frannie.”

“Me neither.”

“I won’t hold back.”

“Hm!”

They smiled at each other before readying their weapons. The Madonna smiling at the pretty girl would’ve been picturesque if they weren’t about to murder each other.

“Hee hee.”

“Hm.”

Fran and Amanda locked eyes to preempt any sudden movements. They were ready to throw down.

I Identified Amanda again.

Name: Amanda Age: 58

Race: Half-elf Class: Whip Master Level: 72

HP: 651; Magic: 808; Strength: 330; Agility: 457

Skills: Intimidate 7; Speedcast 6; Stealth 8; Disassemble 8; Wind Magic 10; Brute Force 5; Flash Step 7; Abnormal Status Resistance 7; Omni Radar 6; Elemental Sword 7; Throw 8; Whip Arts 10; Advanced Whip Arts 6; Whip Mastery 10; Advanced Whip Mastery 7; Storm Magic 4; Magic Resistance 6; Mana Sense 6; Orc Killer; Spirit Manipulation; Dragon Killer; Enhanced Storm; Mana Manipulation; Enhanced Whip Class Skill: Sky Whip Arts Unique Skill: Beloved of the Spirits Titles: Protector of Children; Dungeon Raider; Dragon Killer; Swift Breeze; Wind Mage; Monster Exterminator; A-Rank Adventurer Equipment: Sky Dragon’s Beard; Hydra Hide Armor; Venom Gecko Mantle; Mad Eye Bull Boots; Armlet of Sacrifice; Thunderbird Feather; Barrier Ring; Shock Owl Throwing Feathers x24

Amanda was still the all-rounder, and seemed to have gotten even stronger during her travels. Fran had the upper hand in weapon skills, though. Still, we might not be able to beat her in a no-holds-barred brawl, so the tournament rules helped our odds.

Now, that new Class of hers... I was pretty sure she was a Storm Warrior last

time. Did she change to Whip Master because it was better suited to the tournament? I'd never seen that Class Skill, either.

Sky Whip Arts: Speeds up the activation of Whip Arts by consuming more resources.

How fast could she go? We had to keep our guard up, especially when her Class had the word "Master" right there in its name. The additional resource cost would prevent her from using it forever, so I wondered if we could score some hits in that time.

The commentator saw that both combatants were ready and announced the start of the fight. "Begin!"

I was casting spells a moment later.

"Hexagon Tornado."

Thunderbolt!

Thunder Chain!

Tornado Lance!

I anticipated her whip with tornadoes, and locked Amanda down with the speed and electricity of Thunder Magic. I'd invested some points in it after Lumina told us that it was the bread and butter of Black Sky Tigers. Thunderbolt was the one I had the most faith in. It was fast and stunned the opponent when it connected, making it perfect for locking down movement, like a more powerful Stun Bolt. Thunder Chain wasn't as powerful, but its primary use was in binding the enemy in electric chains.

That wouldn't be enough to defeat Amanda. Beloved of the Spirits, her Unique Skill, allowed her to nullify a fatal attack. We had to burn down that layer of armor before we could begin to beat her. My spells would hold her down and warrant the activation of her Unique Skill. After that, Fran could move in for the kill with Flashing Thunderclap. We weren't going to let Amanda hit us with her big attacks, especially when we were faster than her.

We still had the upper hand in melee, despite the striking speed of her whip. I was ready with Physical Immunity just in case she got a counter in. Amanda was

probably going for a one-hit kill, too, despite the multiple lashes her whip could dole out. I just needed to resist one hit.

Fran focused her mana.

Come on, Fran.

“Hm! Flashing—”

But Amanda cut her off before she could finish. “Invocation: Vaisravana!”

“—Thunderclap!”

With a crack of her whip, Amanda dispelled everything on the field. All the thunder and typhoons disappeared. Soon, a hurricane was closing in on us. It tore up the floor under Fran’s feet, sending bits of rubble flying all over the place. Meanwhile, our mana pool was drastically draining.

“Hrmph!”

Tch!

Even accelerating my perception with Timespace Magic only let me catch a glimpse of what was happening. Amanda lashed out so rapidly with her whip that it produced hurricanes. Her whip looked like it had multiplied by ten.

Physical Immunity was working overtime, and our mana was draining fast. There was nowhere to run. To make matters worse, each lash produced a shockwave as sharp as a knife. It reminded me of the whipmeisters back home who made sonic booms by cracking their whips at the right speed and angle. I was pretty sure Amanda had already broken the sound barrier. She suspected Fran of being faster than her, and her tactic of rapid-fire lashes served to seal off every escape. It wouldn’t be long before our mana ran dry.



Teacher, warp!

Short Jump!

Fran was right—getting out of there was better than having our mana exhausted. I teleported us a short distance, ignoring whatever damage Fran was suffering. We were supposed to teleport behind Amanda, but she was gone. She had already run off to the other side of the arena. We'd pushed our luck too far. She knew our warp habits. A second was all she needed to dodge a blink strike, as long as she could read it. Gaudartha did the same thing, although he was slower. But here was something she'd never seen before.

“Vernier!”

With teleportation unviable, Fran boosted herself towards Amanda. Beloved of the Spirits hadn't activated yet, so she couldn't use her Black Lightning. We had to get that first hit in!

“Haaa!”

Fran charged through the storm. She was too fast. Amanda couldn't dodge.

Claaaang!

We did it! Beloved of the Spirits blocked my killing blow, but that was enough. Fran was close enough to hit her. She turned her blade and swung.

“Tsch!”

I charged myself with my remaining mana. *You're going down, Amanda!* I closed in on her as her eyes widened in shock.

Haaaaa!

“Aaaaah!”

Aside:

Amanda I SCREAMED AS I WATCHED Fran fight Gaudartha. She was so much stronger now. I couldn't believe it. I knew that she would grow up strong and beautiful, but thought it would take at least ten years. I'd honestly thought she would lose. I certainly would've had trouble facing the rhino.

Her growth was abnormal. I had met talented adventurers with potential in the past, but Fran was on another level. She must have been fueled by her desire to evolve, and fought with that burning desire.

And then there was Teacher, her strange sword. I'm sure he must've provided Fran with guidance, as well. Teacher himself looked stronger than when I last saw him. His skills were leveled up, and I sensed the great mana inside him. I couldn't let my guard down.

Fran showcased some strange skills during the Gaudartha fight: Timespace Magic, Thunder Magic, and the ability to rapidly cast one spell after another. And most impressive of all, Black Cat Evolution.

I found Physical Immunity to be her most surprising skill. I only noticed it because I'd fought someone who had it once. She took Gaudartha's axe head-on without flinching, an impossible feat for even the strongest of barriers. If it wasn't Physical Immunity, it must be something similar. A dangerous skill, but not without its weaknesses. I could tell that Fran consumed a lot of mana to activate it. Once she ran out, crushing her would be a cinch.

"Not that I think I'm in for a walk in the park..."

I needed to prepare myself. I was actually fighting her *and* Teacher—I didn't know where one's power started and the other's stopped. The nobles around me shouted as they watched her fight.

"That girl is very impressive. Adventurer?"

"Oh, but she's a beastman. She must be from the country."

"I want her in my army. Such strength."

“I won’t let you get first dibs, old chap.”

“I can think of many ways of employing her beauty.”

“Ho ho ho, like under my—”

Fran was strong and young, after all. Still, I couldn’t just let these disgusting men say whatever they wanted. Which of my spells should I use?

“She would do nicely in the Imperial Guard.”

“She could keep my daughter safe.”

At least some of these people had standards. I’d hold off on burning the entire room. Oh, but Fran had grown up so much...

A Black Cat couple happened to visit me one day over ten years ago. They were adventurers who’d been under the care of my orphanage a few years before. Their names were Kenan and Framere, and they’d come to show me their newborn baby.

We’d parted on unfriendly terms, so I was happy to see them again. It was my fault. I’d prohibited them from pursuing Evolution and becoming adventurers. They just didn’t have the talent for it. They didn’t have much mana, and possessed only an average mastery of weapons. Since they grew up around me, they thought adventuring couldn’t be too hard. But it wasn’t quite so easy that the natural talents of a beastman could get you through. The only future I saw for them was death.

I could’ve handled that conversation better. I should’ve listened to them before voicing my objections. That was why I was so happy when they introduced me to their baby: Fran.

That baby shared the same name, and would be about the same age as my Fran. I’d thought she was dead. I’d heard news that Kenan and his family had died, but baby Fran was nowhere to be found. That’s why I didn’t recognize her when I first met her in Alessa. I thought that little baby had died. But her face reminded me just as soon as I asked for her name. She looked so much like Framere when she was a little girl.

I thought of becoming her guardian. I knew her parents, after all. But I didn’t

think I had any right. In the end, I hadn't been able to protect Kenan and Framere. And, besides, Fran was doing all right by herself.

I decided to keep quiet and protect her in another way, so I sparred with her, to be her teacher and instruct her. Unfortunately, she already had Teacher to take care of her. But that was all right.

There was something only I could do. I could become the wall she had to overcome.

Fran would become one of the great adventurers in history, but there might come a day when her strength would make her complacent. I would be the wall to remind her that there were always stronger people. That she was still young. It was a mission I couldn't entrust to anyone else.

I couldn't remember the last time I trained so hard. I even levelled up Whip Arts for the first time in ten years. Fifty was still young for a half-elf, but I'd been using elven years to count my life, and I was slacking off. I had plateaued, and I couldn't improve everything I wanted, but I got a lot done in those few months.

Now that I was a Whip Master, I could beat Fran. It was a Class I had pursued for years. The best way to get stronger was to have a clear goal.

Today, I stood opposite Fran in the ring. She smiled without a trace of fear. Winning was the only thing on her mind.

"I won't hold back."

"Hm!"

I had to put my life on the line. Fran was much faster than me—I'd gathered that much from yesterday's fight. I also knew that Black Lightning would fry me in one strike. She had gotten even stronger since she evolved.

I had to win this match. I had to become her wall. A close shave wouldn't cut it. I had to defeat her completely. How could I say to her "You've got a long way to go!" if I was half-dead when I said it? I was ready to make my sacrifice.

"Begin!"

"Hexagon Tornado."

Fran launched multiple spells as soon as the fight started. Teacher was

definitely behind most of them. How else would you explain the thunder spells when she only cast wind? She sent lightning and tornados at me—wind to disrupt my whip, and electricity to paralyze me.

Good plan, but not good enough. I used my strongest Advanced Whip Art, releasing my charged-up mana all at once. Using most of my mana in one go was a risky move. If Fran handled this attack, I might very well lose.

“Invocation: Vaisravana!”

My whip lashed all over the arena, so fast that even I couldn’t keep up with it. It blew Fran’s spells away, and I attacked too fast for Fran to dodge. But she still had Physical Immunity. I felt my attacks land, but Fran was unscathed. She was visibly losing mana, though, so I kept up my assault. I had to keep going!

I couldn’t keep this attack up forever. Advanced Whip Arts rapidly ate away at my whip’s durability. If I used it for long enough, my weapon would tear itself to shreds. I loved this whip and I’d had it for a long time, but I was prepared to lose it in this fight. I would worry about the finals after I beat Fran.

Soon, she disappeared from my sight.

“Here it comes.”

Teleportation with Timespace Magic. Easy enough to handle, as long as you knew what you were looking for. I immediately distanced myself from my starting position. I saw her look of shock when she found that I wasn’t there, but she didn’t give up. Fire burned in her eyes. She navigated the storm of whiplashes by skill and magic. She was fast, much faster than I expected.

Frannie, you’re so strong!

“Haaaa!”

Claaaang!

Beloved of the Spirits triggered. I couldn’t dodge her attack in time. I was in Fran’s range now. This was bad.

“Tsch!”

Her sword was charged up with black lightning! I had to dodge it!

“Aaaaah!”

I was a few inches away from piercing Amanda's eye when I broke.

Gah!

"Huh?"

Amanda's attack, still ravaging the whole arena, had finally drained my mana. Physical Immunity deactivated.

Argh!

Receiving the full weight of Amanda's attack, half my blade immediately shattered. Fran suffered the same fate—a crack of Amanda's whip sent her flying.

"Oof!"

I could regenerate later. I had to heal Fran! The warmth of her blood ran down my blade. Her body was covered with deep lacerations. How many strikes had she taken? Physical Immunity was out of the question, but at least I had enough mana to heal her.

Heal!

Hang in there! Just don't die yet!

My prayers went unanswered. The Cradle of Time activated, and time reversed.

"What just happened?! Ten seconds in and the battle is over!" the commentator spat into his microphone.

Surely it had been more than ten seconds?

"Fran's salvo of spells was dissipated with a thundering crack of Amanda's whip! If you caught anything after that, give us a call, because this commentator couldn't keep up!"

If our attack had landed, I was confident we would've won. But Amanda's whip was far stronger than I imagined.

"I'll tell you what I can see, though: the destruction of our beautiful arena! Ten seconds in, and the ring looks like the ruins of a war zone!" The

commentator accurately described the arena. What wasn't broken was severely damaged.

"We...lost?"

Yeah.

Fran picked me up, still dazed. It had all gone by so quickly. "Already?" she muttered, still finding it difficult to believe.

Yeah.

Amanda approached us. "Fran, are you okay?!"

She was panting. That one move exhausted her, knocking out over half her mana. But she was more worried about Fran than herself. Amanda loved children, and it had to have gone against her very nature to kill Fran. Her face was filled with sorrow.

Fran got up and flexed to prove her that she was okay.

"You've gotten tougher, Frannie. That was a close fight, but I guess I'm still stronger."

"Hm."

"I had to give up my whip, though..."

It was in tatters. The move was so powerful that even Amanda's weapon couldn't sustain it for long. I guess that's what happened when your attacks left craters in the arena. I would probably break, too, if Fran attempted anything like that. Amanda's whip didn't look like it was coming back from this. Cradle of Time had only activated for Fran, leaving Amanda without its benefits.

The loser was consoled by being brought back from the dead, while the winner had to carry the burden of victory.

"I knew you were the better swordsman when I watched your quarterfinals. You're faster and stronger than I am, too. I had to come up with a special tactic to beat you."

She'd figured all that out from that one fight.

"And you've gotten hold of Physical Immunity, or something like it."

“Well—”

“You don’t have to tell me. I had a hunch when you beat Colbert. You can’t use that kind of defense forever, though. I just needed to hit it enough to break through.”

We’d played right into her hands. She kept her distance and kept pressure on us to drain our mana. We weren’t outclassed in strength—Amanda had outmaneuvered us through her superior knowledge. No wonder she made it to A-Rank.

“I lost...”

“Don’t be so down on yourself.”

“I didn’t train hard enough.”

“Frannie...” Amanda looked flustered. She tried to cheer Fran up, but if she thought Fran was moping, she was mistaken. Fran wasn’t that sort of girl.

“But I’m definitely taking third place!”

She was sad and she had regrets, but she would learn from this defeat and apply it to the next fight. It was a strange kind of optimism that made her an excellent fighter. I felt her enjoyment, too. While Fran didn’t think of Amanda as her teacher or master, she clearly appreciated being stopped by this insurmountable wall.

“Good luck!” Fran said. Amanda looked relieved, and Fran shot her a smile. “You better win the final, Amanda.”

There was only one way to answer that statement.

“You can count on it!” Amanda clapped Fran’s shoulder and nodded. “By the way, are you busy after this? I would love to have dinner together. I think I can win if you pep me up...”

“I’m watching the next fight and going to bed after that.”

“Oh...well, I suppose it can’t be helped.”

They were both sad about it, but Fran needed her rest. She might be restored physically, but her mind still needed to recover.

We watched the next match from our private room. Amanda was roped in by the tournament officials in preparation for tomorrow. She wouldn't have had time for dinner, regardless. *I'm so sorry, Amanda. At least we had a clear view of the arena from here.*

"I can see everything."

Yeah.

Fran fidgeted in her seat, waiting for Forlund and Phelms. I was looking forward to this battle of the giants, too. The crowd burst open with applause. I think Forlund was slightly more popular, if we were measuring it in decibels. As the crowd's shouting reached its peak, the match began.

It lasted a lot longer than I expected. Phelms evaded Forlund's multitude of swords, and even managed to cut some down with his threads. With his rapid attacks, Phelms looked like he had the upper hand in the storm of spool and swords.

But Forlund turned it around in a second. He summoned about a hundred swords in an instant, and sent them flying about in the arena. Phelms struggled to find a way out of the sword hell. In the end, they proved too formidable. The swords chased the old gentleman down and ran right through his body.

I guess we're up against Phelms for third place.

I breathed easy. They were both strong, but Forlund had the power to copy any magic sword he touched. I didn't want to think about what would happen if he got his hands on me.

We're in for a tough fight.

"Powerful strings."

That was all we could say, really. We knew he was strong, but we'd never fought anyone who used wires before.

"We'll still beat him."

We got some hints from watching him just now. We'll damn well try.

"Hm!"

Night fell over the alleys of Ulmutt. A woman screamed as if she was being pursued.

“No, no, no! This is all that girl’s fault!” the young woman shrieked.

She was dressed in mage’s robes, her cheeks were sunken, and her eyes had bags under them. A shame. She used to be beautiful. She moved like a wraith as she shuffled through the darkness.

“What now... What should I do...?! My master would never forgive me...” the woman muttered, turning her head now and then to check for pursuers. “No...! I won’t let it end like this...!”

The woman made her decision. A dark decision, specific only to those who set their sights on hell.

“I need that girl’s sword!”

“It’s a lovely day for a fight to the death! We open our festivities today with a match for third place!”

This was the last time I would get to hear the commentator’s excited voice.

What’s wrong, Teacher?

Today’s the last day of the tournament.

More reason to give it our all.

You’re right.

Hm!

Fran nodded enthusiastically. She was having none of my premature nostalgia. Her only concern was the immediate match against Phelms. Very reassuring.

“Coming in from the West Gate: C-Threat Adventurer, the Princess of Black Lightning, Fran! She is without a doubt this year’s breakout combatant! And it’s not about her looks, either! Beneath her cute appearance are fangs that took down an A-Rank! Will she show us her Black Lightning again today?!”

The crowd roared again. It was familiar by now. They received Fran with feverish enthusiasm. And here I thought they were just here for the finals.

What about Phelms? He'd said he only wanted to reach the semifinals the last time we talked. I hoped he hadn't lost his motivation.

"There he is." Fran directed her gaze towards the lean gentleman at the other end of the stadium.

I hate to admit it, but he looks like he's in top shape.

Phelms smiled casually as he walked into the ring. He wasn't nervous, and I knew he wasn't about to go easy on Fran, either. His oppressive aura was more apparent when he was right in front of us. He was like a deep river, as the old cliché went—calm on the surface, with a strong current rushing underneath. I didn't expect any less from the veteran A-Rank.

Good.

Yeah, for you.

Fran would be disappointed if Phelms wasn't at the top of his game.

"Coming in from the East Gate: Dragon Hunter Phelms! He's a retired adventurer, but this old dandy can still run circles around his spry juniors! He may be fighting for third place, but his old strength is alive and well!"

Phelms wore his usual light armor, if you could call it that—a white shirt and black slacks. The man looked like a butler who had taken off his suit jacket. Of course, if you looked closer, you'd see it was all made of dragon materials. Scales were even woven into the fabric of his shirt to reinforce it.

"Hello. It's been a while."

"Hm."

"Would you be upset if I said that I didn't expect to see you here?" he asked.

"I feel the same way about you."

"Ha ha ha. You got me there."

We'd fully expected Royce to win his earlier match, but the old man had proven his mettle. I didn't know what to expect from his strings. How did you

even fight like that, anyway? Most worrying of all was his combat experience. That was one way to overcome our superior stats. If we were more experienced, we could've handled Amanda's reckless tactic yesterday.

"The young rising star versus the wise former A-Rank! Who will win this battle of extremes?!"

"Me," said Fran.

"Ah, but you're mistaken. I am going to win."

Fran readied her sword and Phelms dropped into his fighting stance. He looked like a karate fighter, with his spools of thread probably hidden under his gloves. I checked the threads out, just in case.

Name: King Baleen Battle Wire Attack: 100-489; Mana: 500; Durability: 500

Mana Conductivity: C-A Skills: Timespace Element, Flash Element, Ocean Element, Frost Element Name: Dragon-Eater Spider Thread Attack: 55-455; Mana: 300; Durability: 700

Mana Conductivity: D-B+

Skills: Flame Element; Sand Element; Land Element; Storm Element; Steel Element; Thunder Element That was a lot of elements. Could he change each thread at will? I guessed their attack power changed depending on their length and thickness.

"The combatants look ready to tear each other to pieces!"

Fran and Phelms locked eyes.

"Let the match for third place...begin!"

I immediately launched the spells I had prepared.

"Thunderbolt."

Gale Hazard.

Blaze Wave.

Acid Venom.

Our spell salvo should work against Phelms, even if it failed against Amanda.

His threads would conduct enough electricity for Thunder Magic to be effective. The wind spell was there to blow his threads away, and I threw in a flame spell just in case they were flammable. The poisonous acid was there just in case they weren't.

Our spells mowed down the threads Phelms sent after us. The strategy worked for defense, but our spells were soon overwhelmed by the sheer multitude of wires. I felt powerful mana emanate from each thread. Magic wasn't going to be enough.

We have to get closer.

"Hm."

Phelms had the advantage in ranged combat and could easily dissipate any spell we threw at him. Ironically, if we had an extra couple hundred meters between us, we would have the upper hand. Unfortunately, there wasn't enough space. We couldn't retreat far enough to escape his threads.

The only thing left to do was get into close quarters. We decided to forego Physical Immunity this time, Amanda's million lashes still fresh in our minds.

We need to get closer.

Yeah.

We needed speed. Speed enough to break through the threads unscathed.

"Flashing Thunderclap!"

"Hrm!"

Black Lightning accelerated Fran forwards, the sudden boost in speed startling the veteran. He should've anticipated Flashing Thunderclap after watching Fran's fight with Gaudartha, but there was a difference between watching it and seeing it activate in front of your eyes.

He sent more threads after her, but there was no stopping us. Besides, speed wasn't the only way to avoid his wires.

Teacher, the plan!

Got it! Dimension Shift!

Short Jump!

He could tell where would go, so I used Dimension Shift to cover our tracks. The Timespace spell allowed attacks to go right through us. Activating it took a few seconds, but I just needed it to cover the gap that teleportation left in our defense.

Phelms looked up, read our move, and surrounded the space above him with threads, but Fran slipped through all of them unscathed.

“Hrm! Timespace Magic...! Dimension Shift, I see!”

He’d figured it out?! I hated dealing with veterans. They had ways of dealing with everything, even Timespace manipulation!

“Haaa!”

Fran brought me down from the sky, but Phelms had taken this into account. A barrier of threads encased the old man, stopping us mid-plunge. Each individual wire was reinforced with mana, dissipating the force of Fran’s sword. Despite our advantage in skills, we didn’t know how to deal with these threads. Fran couldn’t see what he would do, even with her Sword King Mastery.

Well, we’re just getting started!

The black lightning covering Fran’s body ran down my blade. I hoped the current would run through the threads and electrocute Phelms. It was a noble wish.

“That’s not going to work.”

“Hrmph!”

The power of the black lightning faded instead of shocking the old man. He had spun enough threads to disperse the electrical current. Fran began hacking away at the barrier, dishing out more electricity with every slash. However, the barrier held. How did he handle this so well?!

One more time!

Dimension Shift.

Short Jump.

Create Clones!

I repeated the teleport strategy, but this time I made clones to provide a distraction. They would be destroyed in a second, but that was okay. Phelms wouldn't ignore them, even if he knew they were clones, especially since they had physical bodies. Watching copies of myself die was unsettling, but I was getting used to it. Still, I didn't expect the shape my three copies took this time.

"Hm?"

What?

Name: Clone Attack: 100; Mana: 50; Durability: 100

Mana Conductivity: C

Instead of creating human bodies that reflected my past life, I made swords. They were exact replicas, and Phelms became more wary of them than I expected. His concentration was split between the multiple swords that suddenly surrounded him. I could ponder why I'd made swords instead of bodies later. We had a battle to win.

Go!

I sent my replicas flying into Phelms. Well really, I just let them fall. I didn't expect any of them to do significant damage. He destroyed them with his threads in one flick. They didn't have the durability to last, but they made for a good distraction. We were lucky that Phelms had just lost to Hundred Blades Forlund. He was really scared of our replicas. In fact, he paid more attention to them than he did to us.

"Tsch!"

Eat this!

Fran accelerated with Flashing Thunderclap, amplified with myriad other spells. It was her fastest attack so far today. She broke through the thread barrier and charged Phelms. He didn't see it coming, and we took advantage of his surprise.

"What?!"

Phelms dodged the bulk of our blow, but a thin line of blood flowed from his

arm. Nothing much, but I had coated my blade with Venomfang. I doubted it would do significant damage, considering his Abnormal Status Resistance. Still, I was hoping that the poison would throw him off a little bit. Manipulating that many threads must require his whole attention.

Fran pressed the advantage and went on the offense. She was doing a lot better now that we were at close quarters. Wounds began to pile up on Phelms' body, and he jumped back to give himself more distance. Was he really that bad at melee? As we were about to give chase, however...

Fran, wait!

“Hrmph!”

A geyser of threads erupted from under Fran's feet. They moved like tentacles, tracking her down to tie her up. Phelms must've set this up in case he got drawn into melee combat. We'd played right into his hands. Fran managed to dodge, thanks to her Trap Sense, but we needed to be more careful. Phelms' Lay Trap level was pretty high, and there was no telling where his tripwires might be. Even worse, the old man had managed to escape. This left us in the red—Flashing Thunderclap had eaten away at Fran's life while I spent mana on the Timespace spell. These wires were a lot more dangerous than I thought!

“One more!”

Yeah!

We charged forward with Dimension Shift. Phelms started to move away, but we were prepared for it this time.

Jet!

“Grrr!”

“What?!”

Jet stuck his face out of Phelms' shadow and clamped his jaw around his ankle. We told Jet to wait for our signal, since we knew he couldn't keep dodging Phelms' innumerable threads. Phelms must've known about our direwolf, but had probably forgotten about him. Fran moved in for the kill, but Phelms' defense proved too formidable.

“Grargh!”

“Jet!”

Blood dripped from Jet’s face as wounds opened up on his muzzle from the multitude of invisible threads. Jet yelped in pain and let go.

Jet, get back in the shadows!

“Arf...”

Phelms was a tough opponent for Jet, who focused on evasion more than defense. We should probably keep our distance if a single thread did him that much damage.

“Hmph!” Phelms made a large gesture as Fran continued her advance, creating a wall of wires.

Teacher!

On it!

We were ready to teleport and continue our charge, until we were suddenly thrown into the air.

“Gah!”

Another trap?!

It happened again. Tentacle-like threads chased after Fran as she tripped another wire. Phelms didn’t attack with his left hand, but that didn’t mean it was idle. The fingers moved intricately, unlike the grand gestures of his right. I had no way to be sure, but I assumed his left hand was the reason my Trap Sense going crazy.

We have to get rid of these threads!

Hm!

Burning them would be better than just dodging them.

“Inferno Burst.”

Inferno Burst!

Inferno Burst!

Inferno Burst!

We focused our flame spells on a single point. The move was similar to when the P.A. focused her spells on one point during the Lich fight. It wasn't perfect, but it was far more powerful now that synergy gave it a penetrating property. The flaming snake chased him down, burning everything in its path. This should work!

To our surprise, Phelms managed to handle it. He whipped his threads around the flame to weaken it, which made sense. But then he threw himself into the fire.

"Hiiiiyaaa!"

He punched the roaring flames with his right hand. It was weaker now, sure, but it was still a blazing inferno! Was he going to sacrifice his own arm?

Before our shock could wear off, Phelms extinguished the flames entirely. His arms were now encased in woven mana threads. Paired with his high-level Flame Resistance, he was pretty much flameproof.

"They call me the Dragon Hunter for a reason, you know. Their breath tends to be quite fiery."

Phelms had fought dragons all his life, and our spells did resemble a dragon's breath attack. No wonder he handled them so easily.

We switched gears and turned to the wind element.

"Wind Cutter."

Tornado Lance.

Gale Hazard.

Hexagon Tornado.

But Phelms took our wind spells in stride, too. He broke up the gusts of wind with his threads, even forming walls to divert them away from his body. I guess there were dragons who produced hurricanes with their wings and breath, too. He handled the attack with ease, as though he had seen it a thousand times.

With fire and wind out of the question, we were forced to resort to thunder

and Timespace.

Let's start with Timespace.

Not that Timespace Magic offered many offensive spells to begin with. Dimension Sword was the only one that fit the bill, and even that could only be used up close. We warped in and fired one off. The spell moved through physical objects to cut a specific point in space. In exchange for this extraordinary penetrative capability, it had a very short range. You also couldn't change the spell's trajectory, and moving even an inch would cause it to miss. Given that Phelms was mostly stationary, I hoped it would land.

"I've seen that before."

"Tch!"

Earth Digger!

"That one, too."

But the veteran proved his experience. He knew Dimension Sword and dodged it completely. I thought taking the ground from under him would prevent him from moving, but he predicted this move and formed a web over the pitfall.

"Now it's my turn!" he said.

"These threads...!"

Some of the threads formed sickles and whipped into Fran. The smaller threads formed spears and launched at her from all sides. Each point was strong enough to pierce plate armor. The hidden threads were even more dangerous. On top of being practically invisible, these thin wires were charged with Phelms' mana and sharp enough to lop off an arm or two. Our barrier managed to hold them off, but we couldn't let our guard down.

Fran, things are only going to get worse for us the longer this drags out. He can probably keep making threads indefinitely. There's no end to them!

Hm! Got it.

Phelms continued weaving, despite all our attempts at burning, cutting, and destroying them. I didn't know if it was his Create Mana Thread skill or

something about his equipment, but the wires kept on coming. He was even able to control the threads after they were cut off, further adding to his web.

Teacher, use Thunder Magic.

Sure.

He'd dispersed our thunder spells earlier, but there had to be a limit to that. A spell like Thunderbolt should be able to overload him. Black Thunderfall would immediately kick Fran out of her awakened state, so we held off on using that for now. Its area of effect was far too focused. We needed something that would prevent Phelms from running away.

Thor's Hammer!

The Level 8 thunder spell covered a sufficient amount of ground—not enough to set the plains on fire, but good enough for the purposes of this arena.

“Hrmph!”

Get those threads out of here!

A giant magic circle formed over the arena, and large pillar of lightning shot out, crushing everything like the hammer of an angry god. We could mitigate its wrath with Fran's Thunder Resistance and my Dimension Shift. Phelms should be the only one fried to a crisp.

“...!”

Seriously?!

But it was not to be. I lost count of how many times our expectations had been subverted today. The thick bolt of lightning disintegrated upon touching a single thread. I couldn't believe my eyes.

But that was a high-level thunder spell!

“This is a barrier I prepared specifically for thunder dragons. It's served me well, even after all these years.”

There goes lightning! His weave must be strong if it could fend off thunder dragons. I realized there must be a dragon for every element, and started having second thoughts about using magic.

“Tidal Weave!”

Fran’s shock at seeing our attack fail hadn’t worn off, and Phelms exploited this chance by sending a wall of threads that looked like a tsunami. Should I teleport us away, or break through it with sword and spell?

I’m going in!

Got it. Dimension Gate!

It was Phelms’ turn to be shocked as he saw us charge through his wall. Dimension Gate was much easier to control than Short Jump. He tried to get away from Fran as she stepped out of the gate, but it was too late.

“Haaa!”

Fran slashed right across Phelms’ body. I gasped in surprise, startled at the odd sensation of cutting through his flesh. It was a lot more brittle than I remember.

This is...!

“Hm...?”

A dummy!

Threads burst out of the body instead of blood. He had crafted a puppet of himself, even casting a spell on it to make it look like him—all in the time it took us to break through his wire wall. Fran shook off the threads and looked for him. He was right behind us!

Swoop! Wires shot from Phelms’ hand and looped around Fran’s neck. It was only a few strands, but they could easily chop off her head.

“Ha!” Fran dodged and pivoted. She tossed me into her free hand and stabbed Phelms’ right side.

“What?!” Phelms contorted his body, evading our counterattack. He whirled and launched more threads from the back of his hand.

Fran pressed on, cutting through the threads that were reaching for her neck, but Phelms was persistent. He set tripwires around Fran’s feet to disrupt her. She only managed to keep her feet attached thanks to her barrier. She made

another attempt at stabbing him, but he leaned back like a limbo dancer. However, that was the limit of his movement. She immediately brought her sword down on him. He shouldn't be able to dodge that.

And yet, just as I was about to cut through him, his body moved at an impossible angle. It jolted to the right while he was still leaning back. As I looked closer, I found that there were threads attached to his body. He must've used them to yank himself to the right.

We got him, though.

"Hm!"

I felt my blade reach his organs, despite not cutting him straight through. His threads nullified my Elemental Blade, but not my physical one.

"Gah...Weave Bandage."

Come on, how many tricks does he have left?

His threads wrapped around the gushing wound. It didn't seal the cut completely, but it was good enough to stop the bleeding. Slight blood loss wouldn't impair him in battle, thanks to his Pain Immunity. He was also wearing a Bracelet of Life Regeneration instead of his Bracelet of Poison Immunity today. He'd soon be back to full health.

He jumped backwards, realizing the dangers of being in close. "You're pretty good."

"You too!" Fran prepared to charge again.

"I'll have you stay there, if you don't mind." Mana gathered in Phelms' fingers. So far, it had been distributed all over the arena via his threads. This was the first time he was focusing it on a singular point.

Get ready! It's a big one!

"Hm!"

"Thread Manipulation! Formation of the Four Spirits!"

Phelms crossed his arms over his chest, then flung them open. Every thread stretched out over the arena obeyed his command and launched at Fran. Each

one was also slightly elementally charged, making for a rainbow display of slaughter. We couldn't fend off the swarm of spools for long.

"Kaah!"

Heal!

"Haaa!"

Short Jump!

We cut them down as they came, burning them with spells, dodging them with warps, and healing through the damage. None of the hits had been lethal so far, but our mana was constantly draining. We weren't the only ones with a mana upkeep, though. Phelms was feeling it, too.

Should we turn on Flashing Thunderclap and go into overtime? I could easily heal through Phelms' attacks, and it seemed like the older man would run out of mana before we did.

"Augh!"

What the—?! Greater Heal!

A gash appeared on Fran's leg. I quickly healed it, but she was hit with another that took off her arm.

"What is—argh!"

Greater Heal!

What was going on? Why wasn't our barrier working? Did Phelms have an attack that can go through barriers? This was bad!

Dimension Shift!

I used a Timespace spell to get us out of there, but the strange attack kept happening.

"Ungh!"

Heal!

A wound formed over Fran's cheek, despite the fact that we were mid-Dimension Shift. The attack didn't just go through barriers! I wracked my brain,

trying to figure out what would be capable of such a feat, and noticed then that some threads were passing through others, and right through our barrier. They had the same attribute as my Dimension Sword.

I remembered the skills on one of the threads. King Baleen Battle Wire's Timespace Element! That was what gave them the ability to pass through barriers.

"Our barrier's useless."

Pretty much.

We couldn't keep dodging like this. Dimension Shift was rendered useless, too. But his Timespace threads might be difficult to weave, since he hadn't used them right away. Maybe I was looking at things wrong. His Timespace threads would soon overwhelm us, leaving us with no way of defending ourselves. Even teleportation was useless.

There was no more room for doubt.

Teacher, I'm using our trump card!

Yeah, let's finish this fight!

The longer this fight dragged on, the worse it was for us. We had to finish it. We charged up our mana while desperately dealing with Phelms' intense assault. We managed to avoid any fatal blows, thanks to Sword King Mastery and the training of our Sense skills, but we were losing mana fast.

Phelms' barrier would block any light attacks we made. His threads had high mana conductivity on top of being plain strong. It would take a powerful attack to break through. Well, we would just have to hit his barrier with our most powerful attack.

Fran!

Is it ready, Teacher?

Yeah, sorry it took so long.

Fran grinned with a satisfied smile, even though her body was covered with wounds. Her aura even gave Phelms cause for concern. We would definitely lose if this attack failed, but Fran was happy to unleash all our strength for once.

She was smiling in the heat of battle, thankful for such an opportunity.

Jet, start running.

Woof.

Do it.

You got it!

I cast the spell, putting every bit of my mana into it.

Haaaa! Kanna Kamuy!

Collateral damage was inevitable. This move was almost impossible to control. The only reason why I was comfortable using it was because I could prevent it from going completely berserk by using Double Mind. This was a spell unlocked only at the highest level of Thunder Magic—the most powerful thunder spell in the world.

It came to fulfillment as I unleashed the concentrated mana.

Groooooar!

The thunder dragon descended with a roar, striking the arena with a pillar of light. Kanna Kamuy, the pinnacle of Thunder Magic, looked more like a natural disaster than a spell. I had doubts about whether a human could cast this, even if they had maxed-out Thunder Magic—the mana cost was just that high. They would either run out of mana, or their brains would fry. Even Fran couldn't use this spell.

I could cast it, but controlling its force was so difficult that it made me uncomfortable. It came with a nasty headache too, preventing me from moving afterwards. I couldn't use it in the heat of battle, at least for now.

"Gaaah!" Phelms screamed as he watched his precious thread barrier scatter and burn.

"Black Thunderfall!" Fran unleashed her Black Lightning, piercing through his damaged barrier. With Kanna Kamuy having consumed his threads, Phelms had no way of defending himself.

"Uraaaagh..." White and black electricity snaked around Phelms' body. Just as

with Gaudartha, we were immediately blown away by it. Fran coughed up blood as she smacked into the barrier protecting the audience from the arena.

Long Jump!

I focused my remaining energy and warped us out, all the way above the arena.

“Urgh...Heal!”

You okay?

“I think...?”

Black Lightning wasn't something we could use in this kind of enclosed space. It caused too much damage. We looked down on the arena and saw that the black and white lightning had joined together in a marbled pattern. The electric chaos prevented us from seeing what was inside.

That was close.

Yeah. We'd be dead if we'd stayed in there.

I'd thought about using both Kanna Kamuy and Black Lightning even before the Gaudartha fight, but decided against it. It was too dangerous, even for us. But I had an idea after seeing Jet escape out of the dome during the Gaudartha fight. I checked the rules, and found that we wouldn't be disqualified for leaving the ring, as long as we didn't touch the ground. Thanks to the barrier, we could escape the wrath of our own spells.

Or so I thought.

“Teacher, look!”

Oh no...the barrier...!

The dome expanded like a balloon. We could feel the electricity, even from outside. This might be bad.

Can't you do something about this?

Jeez, I dunno...let me think...okay. Dimension Gate!

I created a gate linking the inside of the barrier to the outside. Once it found a hole to escape from, the pent-up storm exploded in a backdraft. But that didn't

stop the dome from expanding. It slowed its rate down...but only slightly. Then, my worst fears came true.

Kaboom!

The dome exploded. Violent winds tore through the stands.

“Kyaaaa!”

“Eeeek!”

“H-help!”

I saw pandemonium for the first time. With no time to run, the audience could only panic in their seats. Fortunately, they didn’t have to deal with lightning bolts, since they had already been discharged. They only had to deal with the typhoon. Granted, it was still strong enough to blow away little children. We heard later that it looked like a giant tree of light had grown out of the stadium.

The manatech activated soon after the barrier disappeared, instantly fixing the damage. At least there was no mess to clean up, and mass casualties were averted.

That...was too close.

“Hm. Not doing that again.”

We definitely went too far. *Now, how do we get back down?*

“Any ideas?”

I don’t have much mana left. The most I can do is cancel the momentum of your freefall with telekinesis.

“That works.”

I didn’t have enough left to telekinetically glide Fran down to safety. She was practically out of mana, too, having been kicked out of Awaken. I let her fall, then stopped her with wind spells and telekinesis just as she was about to hit the newly erected dome. It worked, and she got away with only a mild shock.

“Phew.”

How’s Phelms doing?

Did he survive? The ring was completely destroyed. It looked like someone had a field day with an excavator.

“Wow wow wow! Did she really just do that?! I’ve been in this commentator box for a long time, but that was the first time I’ve seen my life flash before my eyes! The barrier was destroyed from the inside out!”

Good thing the commentator was still alive. He proceeded to describe the situation, while most of the audience were still in a panic.

“And our beautiful stadium has been reduced to rubble! Who would’ve thought a twelve-year-old girl could do such a thing!”

We got a better look at the stands now. Things were quite awful—some people were crying, some frozen in place, and some were still frantically trying to escape. But the commentator’s voice reassured them. Their sanity restored, people returned their attention to the ring, anxious to know what had happened, and what would happen next.

“And would you look at the crater inside the ring! Phelms has been raised by the Cradle of Time! The dragon of pure lightning was too much for the Dragon Hunter! With the spectacular display of her namesake, third place goes to the Princess of Black Lightning: Fran!”

The crowd roared with applause. These folks sure took things in stride. They had almost lost their lives. It must’ve felt more like a roller coaster ride than a plane crash.

Let’s get to the ground.

“Hm. Jet.”

“Woof!”

Jet popped out of the shadows and hunkered down in front of Fran. He wasn’t much use in the fight, so the least he could do was give her a ride. The applause rose when everyone saw Fran riding her direwolf. It all got to Jet’s head, and he started to make a victory lap around the arena. The audience lapped it up. Admittedly, it made for a pretty picture.

Fran, wave to the people.

“Hm? Like this?”

The crowd roared with appreciation as Fran waved in a random direction. She was like a rock star.

“Fraaaaaaan!”

“Black Lightning Princess!”

“I want you to be my sister!”

Indeed, my little girl shone brighter than all the idols back on Earth. *No, you cannot have her as your sister.*

We wandered around for a bit, unsure where to land now there was nothing left to land on.

Oh no. What are they gonna do for the finals?

The finals were delayed for three hours because of Fran. The giant crater we left behind took a lot of time to fix. We watched from above as the Land Mages and dwarven craftsmen repaired it.

“Looks like they’re almost done,” Rigdith said.

“Hrm.”

“You’re still eating?”

“Urmph. Mmm.”

“Okay, got it. Enjoy your meal.”

We had been invited to the Beast King’s private room. I thought that we might say a quick hello...but they seemed to have figured out Fran’s weakness for food, and a scrumptious buffet was waiting for her when she entered. Fran was helpless against this temptation. She agreed to watch the finals from the Beast King’s room, having been roped into his plot. Rigdith seemed like a nice guy, and Fran could actually make conversation with him. He probably set this whole thing up.

Fran was the girl of the hour in Ulmutt, especially among the beastmen. All of them were quiet the day before, but everyone wanted to talk to her now. Some of them were forceful, and some of the nobles used their position to be rude to

her. You could never quite avoid those idiots completely.

But what if she was sat right next to the Beast King? No one would dare pull any weird stunts. The only thing abusers feared was someone more powerful than them. Even if Rigdith was interested in Fran, he knew she had the tremendous value of being the first Black Cat to evolve in centuries. He wasn't going to let idiot nobles give the Beastman Nation a bad name. In fact, he might gain their admiration by winning her over. It was a win-win deal, so we played along.

Fran was the most famous Black Cat in the world. She had achieved something denied to her tribe for five hundred years. I wondered if she knew the trouble her popularity would bring. She had wanted to display her Evolution during the tournament and change how people saw her tribe. She was aware that nothing would be the same afterwards, but she wanted to better the lives of her tribesmen.

Fortunately, her acquaintance with the Beast King should ward off anyone that might take advantage of her. It helped to have friends in high places.

“Here's your food.”

“Hm. Thanks.”

For some reason, Gaudartha was serving her faithfully. He patiently got her another plate of roast beef when she asked, and even got Jet some raw meat. The burly bodyguard was acting like a butler. When we asked why, he said it wasn't only because she'd beaten him, but because she was a member of the Ten Tribes. He was also used to the inherent laziness of Black Cats, thanks to the long years he spent under Kiara's tutelage. Serving Fran came naturally to him.

The Beast King called out as she was eating. “Hey, they're making their way in.”

“Hm.” Fran sat on the couch next to Rigdith with her extra-large plate of meat. The small couch looked like it was prepared specifically for her. Not that the Beast King would be so considerate. Apparently, Royce had gone around all the shops in Ulmutt looking for a suitable couch for her. *Sorry about that, Royce.*

Fran and Rigdith watched as Amanda and Forlund entered the arena. I felt bad for having delayed them.

The crowd exploded with so much applause that the stadium shook. Even the Beast King had to cover his ears, and his room came equipped with soundproofing manatech. Fran's flopped ears looked cute as always, but seeing Rigdith and his vassals do the same was kind of disquieting. The commentator began introducing the fighters.

"Coming in from the West Gate is Amanda the Hariti! She seems to have lost her weapon in her last match, so we're very curious to see how she will fight today! But look at that invincible smile, ladies and gentlemen! No wonder the girls like her more than the guys do! What a manly grin!"

Amanda had a different whip strapped to her waist today. While it was a strong enchanted weapon in its own right, it couldn't compare to the whip Amanda had used for years. I wondered if she could handle Forlund with it.

"Making his way in from the East Gate is the man who is closest to S-Rank: Hundred Blades Forlund! No smiles here, folks, just the cool look of a calculating fighter! Can he keep his cold mask until the end of the match?!"

They slowly walked to the center of the arena.



They chatted casually, already acquainted with each other. However, their conversation was drowned out in the noise. One thing was for sure; they weren't going to go easy. They knew each other too well for that. Their desire for battle was building. They went to their starting positions, and began.

"Hrm!"

"Ho ho! That's good!"

You know you had a good fight on your hands when Fran and the Beast King interrupted their meals to watch. Amanda kept her distance and pelted Forlund with wind spells and whip cracks. The newly repaired ring was immediately destroyed again, and Amanda fired the rubble towards him with more wind spells. She wasn't a former Storm Warrior for nothing.

Meanwhile, Forlund produced swords and launched them at her, trying to close the distance. He was good at ranged combat, but he was no match for Amanda. They moved about for a good ten minutes before Amanda decided to end the match with a powerful attack. She couldn't keep this pace up for long. She was taking a beating from Forlund's mana swords. She readied her whip for a match-ending comeback.

"Ultimate: Skanda Killer!"

This wasn't the move that beat us. She placed her whip at her waist as if to quickly draw it like a sword. The attack was so fast that we could only see streaks from this distance. We didn't know what kind of attack it was, but could at least tell that Amanda was the source. Unfortunately, she missed.

"Dang it...I was going for your neck!"

"Close." Forlund managed to dodge Amanda's attempted decapitation. It highlighted the difference of power between us and them. It hurt to know that we still had to master the basics, despite already obtaining great destructive power.

"I won't go easy on you."

"I'll show you how to fight without a weapon!"

Amanda's whip was destroyed in her last attack, leaving her weaponless. The

spare couldn't handle her full power. Amanda fought hard, but the match ended with Forlund's victory.

"Ugh...I can't believe the emotionless jerk beat me..."

"Equip yourself next time."

"With over a thousand combatants in the tournament, your champion this year is Hundred Blades Forlund! The man so strong he might as well be S-Rank!"

Fran watched as Forlund was declared the winner.

He's strong.

Hm! But I'll get stronger than him. And Amanda, too!

Of course.

The Beast King looked down at the arena with the eyes of a carnivore. His fighting spirit boiled over into murderous intent. "Forlund...I'd love to fight him one day."

"Your Majesty, restrain yourself."

"Don't go attacking him out of nowhere, Lord Rig."

"I won't! What do you take me for?!"

"A meathead?"

"A battle junkie?"

"Urk..." Even the proud King Rigdith was no match for his vassals Rosch and Royce. He sulked quietly at their reproach.

"Well, it's almost time for the award ceremony. You should get ready," Royce said.

I had completely forgotten about that. Fran did win third place, after all. I hoped she would be able to stand a boring ceremony. If worse came to worst, I could move her around with telekinesis.

You can sleep if you want to, but just don't snore.

"Hm?"

Just stay awake while you're on stage.

Chapter 7:

The Truth About Godswords **W**E LEARNED A LOT from participating in the tournament.

First and foremost, Fran had evolved. We probably wouldn't have found any leads on Evolution if we hadn't come here. Not only that, but we learned the conditions of breaking the personal and collective curse of the Black Cat tribe—the most vital piece of information Fran needed to accomplish her grand goal of lifting them all up.

And the experience gained from our battles was invaluable. This was the first time Fran could go all out against powerful opponents without worrying about losing her life. Even if we lost to Amanda in the end, we learned valuable lessons about our strengths and weaknesses.

More importantly, we didn't lose when our lives *were* on the line. We got acquainted with the Beast King, and learned about the current state of Black Cats in the Beastman nation. That was all pretty good.

Personally, Fran's new nickname was of the utmost importance to me. "The Princess of Black Lightning" was so much cooler than "Swordceress."

Fran, wake up!

"Hrm...I'm...awake."

We're almost done. Come on, it's your turn.

"Hm..."

Fran was half-asleep, but I couldn't drag her all the way to the podium with telekinesis. Hang in there, Fran!

There's a present for you if you can stay awake!

"Hm. New and improved curry."

I'll cook a batch up just for you.

Fran's eyes lit up at the mention of it, her appetite blowing away her sleepiness. The effects were even more potent now that her beloved curry was

involved. This buff wouldn't last forever, but it should keep her awake long enough for her to receive her medal.

"Fran? Black Cat Fran? Please make your way to the podium."

Go on.

"Hm."

Fran walked up to the podium and received a medal from the viscount of Ulmutt. This was our first time meeting him. Apparently, Dias was the de facto ruler, and the viscount was only there as a formality. The man was lean, and didn't seem disposed towards interfering in other people's business. His meekness made him perfect for the position.

Fran's medal had the Ulmutt crest on it, as well as the words "Third Place." The prize money of one hundred thousand gold would come tomorrow.

"They were spectacular battles."

"Hm."

Fran was curt as usual, but I told her to give him an elegant bow, made possible by Royal Etiquette. There was quite a stir when the crowd saw the young star had impeccable bearing. It always paid to have good manners.

With the award ceremony over, we were summoned to see the Beast King again. He had taken up residence at the most expensive inn in town, going so far as to rent out the entire floor. The Adventurers' Guild had called for her too, but Fran had questions to ask Rigdith first.

There were a number of beastmen outside his residence. I listened to their conversations, and gathered that they were nobles who had come to greet their king. However, he wasn't one for such stuffy formalities, and they were all turned away at the door. They knew His Majesty's ways. He probably did the same thing back home, which meant they'd visited despite knowing they would be turned away. I suppose ignoring your king was in bad taste, even if he didn't feel like seeing you.

Of course, all of them knew Fran. She caused a commotion just by showing up. They gathered around her, though no one dared to say anything. Jet was

back to his original size, and glared at anyone trying to approach. A low growl was all it took to give them second thoughts.

Fran passed through the crowd and entered the inn. Jet retreated back into her shadow as soon as they passed through the gates. I didn't think we could see the Beast King without an appointment, but it turned out that Fran's name was already on his guest list. He must've told reception to let her up. Rigdith was more considerate than I thought.

"Hey. You're early."

The Beast King was lying on his grand sofa. He had taken off his gear and was only wearing a plain white shirt and pants, giving him a wild look. Still, the gold ornaments decorating his clothes suggested that they weren't cheap. The man looked like he belonged in a painting. He was like a lion lazing about in the savannah, while somehow managing to retain his royal aura. But Fran wasn't interested in his appearance, and got closer so she could talk. "Tell me about Kiara."

Yep, that's my girl!

"I'm about to. Have a seat."

"Hm."

Fran sat in front of the Beast King, and Rosch got up to make tea. Rigdith slowly rubbed his chin, thinking about how to start. "I'll have to talk about my old man first—the previous Beast King."

"Sure."

Fran straightened up and listened. The previous Beast King was called Velthus Narasimha, a paranoid man who was feared by his servants. His Evolution into a Golden Lion was only made possible with the help of other members of the royal family. He wasn't a capable warrior, and he was just as bad at commanding his army. Physically and strategically, he was the weakest of all the Beast Kings.

His mad paranoia, coupled with his nonexistent talent, made him fear other members of his race. He exiled many of his subjects, weakening the Beastman Nation's army in the process.

Velthus' paranoid delusions reached their peak in his persecution of the Black Cats. Prejudice was decreasing before he came along, and beast tribes mostly left them to their own devices. But the paranoid king ordered the Blue Cats, both within and without the Beastman Nation, to capture and enslave the Black Cats. He was afraid of an uprising should one of the Black Cats ever evolve. Like him, they were of the Ten Tribes. Like him, they were feline. The king couldn't afford to let sleeping tigers lie.

"In the end, it was my old man's cowardice that made him stop at slavery."

If Velthus wanted to stamp out the Black Cats for good, he should've ordered their genocide. But he was too afraid of incurring the wrath of the gods—or worse, the wrath of his fellow tribes. And he couldn't shake off the feeling that one of them would survive and rise up to kill him.

"It prevented him from killing Kiara, at least."

The king ordered her capture after receiving news from his Blue Cats outside the country. He hesitated to kill her, and besides, he could use her to set an example. He could nip their rebellious tendencies in the bud by showing that no one could oppose him—not even the strongest Black Cat of their tribe. Velthus could've employed the powerful Black Cat as his own servant, highlighting his influence. Instead, he made her clean drains.

Rigdith then repeated the part of the story we knew already.

"The Beast King held the other Black Cats hostage, and made Kiara into a slave."

The incident with the enemy summoner happened when Kiara was in charge of waste disposal. That was where she met Rigdith, Gaudartha, and Royce. She hadn't lost an ounce of her spirit, despite the long years of slavery. In fact, the scent of royal waste was far less pungent than the depths of a dungeon.

Slavery had forced the Black Cats to be more hardened to suffering than the other races. I remembered Fran's excitement during her first stay at a cheap inn.

"Meeting Kiara made us question the awful conditions the Black Cats were in. To begin with, why were we enslaving members of our own race?"

Kiara's strength showed Rigdith that Black Cats were not inferior. He began looking into historical records and discovered the sins the tribe had committed, strengthening his conviction that prejudice against them was wrong. Even if they had committed a great crime, the gods had already punished them for it. There was no need to enslave them. Young Rigdith even thought it was the king's responsibility to help the tribe undo their curse. The straw that broke the camel's back came when he found out that his father had burned all records of the curse.

"I was the first generation of the royal family to have never heard about it. My old man destroyed everything."

"I already know how to undo the curse."

"What? You do?!"

"Hm."

The Beast King bowed his head. He brought it down so fast that it hit the table with an audible thud. "Tell me," he said. "Please! Just name your price!"

"I'll tell you for free."

"Are you sure? I doubt that information came cheap."

"Yeah, but I don't mind. Make sure this information gets to every Black Cat and we'll call it even." It was Fran's turn to bow her head. She needed his help getting the word out.

A confident look came to the Beast King's face. He grinned, knowing that his network of merchants would be able to spread the word. "I'll get the Adventurers' Guild on it, too. The entire world will know."

"You sure?"

"Count on it. You're talking to an S-Rank, remember?" The king puffed out his chest.

"Why is a king an adventurer?" Fran wondered out loud.

"Why? To get stronger, of course." Rigdith was talking about raw physical strength. "I didn't like the way my father did things, so I became an adventurer, along with Kiara's other pupils. We got stronger, accumulated more and more

supporters, and eventually overthrew the old man.”

Rigdith would never admit it, but he was willing to bear being called “Patricide” and “Usurper” for the sake of helping Kiara and her tribe.

“Thank you.” Fran bowed her head, understanding his motives.

“Cut that out. Don’t you thank me for being selfish. You’re giving me the creeps!”

“Hm. Got it,” Fran said, still bowing her head.

“Okay! We’re done here! Away with you; I’m busy!”

I doubted that very much, considering Rigdith’s state when Fran entered. Still, we excused ourselves, leaving him to his duties.

Come on, Fran.

“Hm.”

Next stop, the Adventurers’ Guild.

“Bye.”

“Yep! See you around!”

Fran raised her hand and the Beast King waved her off. He displayed such unkingly levity, which was probably what made him popular.

Having said our goodbyes, we made our way to the Adventurers’ Guild. It was right next door, and I expected our interview with Dias would take more time than our walk there.

“Why hello, Fran. Congratulations on getting third place,” Dias said as soon as she walked into his office.

“Hrm.”

“Heh heh. What’s the matter? You don’t seem too happy.” The facetious old man knew what he was talking about.

“Because I lost to Amanda.”

“An average C-Rank would give his head to place third in our tournament.” Dias grinned. He knew Fran was not your average C-Rank. The fact that a C-Rank

could beat an A-Rank was downright miraculous. I daresay anyone capable of such a feat had a right to let the victory get to their head. Still, the Guildmaster didn't need to warn Fran about such a thing.

"I couldn't beat the Beast King, either..." she continued, still disappointed in herself.

"No need to compare yourself to a monster like that. I don't think I could do anything to him, either..."

"I'll beat him one day."

"You sound like you're serious." Dias shivered. Well, we still had Forlund and Amanda to beat before we could take on the S-Rank. "I tried pushing you into B-Rank because of your accomplishments...but it's not happening any time soon."

"But I just got into C-Rank."

Isn't she advancing too fast?

Did the tournament count towards her evaluation? It was a good measure for a professional soldier, but an adventurer?

"Even so, you beat an A-Rank. Your fighting capabilities are far beyond a C-Rank."

I guess...so why isn't she getting promoted?

"The other Guildmasters disagreed."

"Other Guildmasters?"

"Yes. I was just on the manaphone with them."

Her age was the primary issue.

"Some appealed to the lack of precedence. But most of them complained that a fighting tournament was a poor measure for an adventurer."

"I see."

I figured. Winning an organized fighting tournament didn't mean you were suited to be an adventurer. That was reasonable enough. The strength of an adventurer lay in more than just combat prowess. A weaker adventurer who could sense and disarm traps, had extensive knowledge about magic and

monsters, and had the calmness of mind to adapt to the situation, could be just as successful as their stronger-but-less-knowledgeable counterpart.

Still, beating an A-Rank did make Fran closer to a B-Rank than a C. In the end, an adventurer still had to know how to fight.

“Fran has also been the subject of exceptional promotions. Others were bound to speak up if she ranked up again so soon.”

I couldn’t disagree there, either. Fran had gained most of her promotions through special missions.

“They also doubted Fran’s ability to lead a party in combat.”

“What do you mean?”

“B-Ranks usually band together to take on missions. They need party leaders to deal with stampedes, disasters, and high-rank monster hunts.”

Fran’s not doing that.

“Hm. Can’t be bothered.”

“I figured,” said Dias. “That was the only point I agreed with them on.”

Her personality made it impossible for her to lead. She had no experience and didn’t really talk. Her party would be wiped out in minutes.

“Finally, Fran’s conduct made her unsuited to become a B-Rank. B-Rank adventurers have to deal with aristocrats.”

“Really?”

“Yes. You are free to accept and refuse, of course, but try telling that to a marquis or a member of the royal family. The guild looks to its stronger members to accomplish the tasks the nobility have for us.”

And that’s where B-Ranks come in.

A-Ranks were powerful, but they were few and far between. They couldn’t take all the important requests if they wanted to, so the guild would deploy its B-Ranks. They risked upsetting the aristocracy if one of them gave offense.

“Not that you have *no* manners, judging by your conduct at the award ceremony.”

Fran's manners were impeccable thanks to Royal Etiquette, although the same couldn't be said for her speech. Maybe she could play the strong and silent type? No, maybe not.

"Which is why Fran will remain a C-Rank for now. Sorry."

"Hm. It's okay."

You did all you could.

A twelve-year-old B-Rank would set too strange a precedent. Fran would have to store up points and work for her promotion like everyone else. But it would make for good training.

"Still, I wanted to give you the promotion if I could, if only to thank you."

"Thank me?"

Dias looked at her seriously. "Yes. I have you to thank for telling us of Kiara's whereabouts. I would've gone on resenting the Beast King if you hadn't come in contact with him. I would've been suspicious of his every move." He bowed his head. "Thank you. Thank you so much. I kept up my end of the deal with Lumina, too, so that's a load off my shoulders."

I'd never seen him so earnest before.

I wondered what would happen with Lumina now. The Black Cat knew that Kiara was safe, but she'd spent a huge amount of her power helping Fran evolve. Ulmutt's dungeons would definitely be affected until she could recover, but I was more worried that she would be disposed of now that she was no longer useful.

Speaking of, how are the dungeons doing?

"Right. There have been fewer monsters since Lady Lumina lost her powers. We're probably going to drop its difficulty rating."

O-oh.

"I'm sorry."

I would have some choice words for us if I were Dias, but the old Guildmaster just shook his head and laughed. "Remember that her previous plan involved

sacrificing herself to help Black Cats evolve.”

Dias had known about Lumina’s plan, though she didn’t tell him the details. She was willing to turn herself into a Fiend and die in order to help Fran evolve.

“Looking at it that way, dropping the dungeon’s difficulty is a small price to pay.”

But you can’t get as many materials and crystals from it.

“True. But now lower-rank adventurers can use it to train. The economy might experience a slight boom if beginners start flocking to our city.”

I was glad to hear that Ulmutt was going to be all right. Fran would’ve been depressed if the once-bustling city became deserted for the sake of her Evolution.

“We can finally get to talking about your quest.”

You mean the C-Rank personal quest?

“Oh yeah.”

It had been put in place to guard Fran from the wiles of the Beast King. Not that we had any use for it now, since Rigdith was our ally...

“I’ve notified the other guilds that you’ll be taking on this quest. You can’t refuse, I’m afraid.”

Okay, what’s it for?

“I’ve been thinking about it, and how would you like to go to the Beastman Nation? You’ll be able to complete the guild’s immigration inspection as you go, and you could get the support of the guild there, too.”

“What would I do when I get there?”

“Confirm the whereabouts of a missing adventurer. There are still people looking for her, and we would like to know how she’s doing.”

Dias wanted to know how Kiara was. He was really good at putting the guild to personal use.

“Uh-huh...”

That's nice of you, Dias.

The Beastman Nation was full of fluffy ears. I would love to check it out.

"But we have an auction to go to."

The one in the capital, right. It's not like we have to attend, so let's head to the Beastman Nation first.

But you could get good crystals at the auction. Fran wanted to go to the auction for my sake.

But we might not. Besides, we can get crystals just as easily in the Beastman Nation. Who knows, some of them might be interesting. Don't worry about it.

"But..."

Dias noticed Fran's inner conflict. "Something bothering you?"

"There's an auction in the capital I wanted to check out. It's in June."

"I see. Well, you still have over a month. Going to the Beastman Nation and finishing your errands should only take about three weeks."

There you go.

"Hm. The Beastman Nation it is." Fran nodded happily, unable to hide her enthusiasm.

"Ha ha ha. Thank you for your cooperation. Now—"

A knock came on the door.

"I'm letting myself in. Oh, Frannie! Hey."

"Elza."

Elza entered the room, looking great despite Amanda's beatdown. Her skin was bright and bouncy, and she seemed to be in a good mood.

"Hello, Elza," said Dias. "Have you found out anything?"

"Lots. They were a lot more cooperative once I wore them down."

"What are you talking about?" Fran asked.

"I had Elza interrogate Solus and Seldio's accomplices." That explained her

bright smile. “They told me a lot of interesting things.”

Given their ambush in the dungeon, Seldio and Solus were definitely taking orders from someone else. This someone must’ve been crooked, judging from the strange enchanted swords in our attackers’ necks and the fact that they were able to bust Solus out of prison.

“Looks like they were working for Marquis Aschtner.”

Marquis Aschtner? Never heard of him. But it sounded like Seldio was somehow related to the man.

“Do you know why they wanted to take Fran’s sword?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Tell me.”

“It’s a really dumb reason. The marquis ordered them to look for Godswords. Seldio was a disgusting pig, but he was still an A-Rank, so he had access to all the guild’s hidden information. But you remember how crazy he was? That’s why he took everything that looked like an enchanted sword. Seldio was so far gone that he couldn’t even serve his master’s purposes. What a joke.”

“They broke their own guys?”

“Marquis Aschtner gave the order that Seldio was to be drugged to keep him in line. He looked like the leader of his own party, but the bandit and mage were the ones pulling his strings. They pushed him too far, and eventually he couldn’t tell left from right anymore.”

The drugs made him lose his mind in the end. He misinterpreted the order to find Godswords and thought any old enchanted sword would do. It was kind of funny, when you put it that way. They had only stopped by Ulmutt to get a refill, since their drug supply was running low—its primary ingredient was the venom sacs of Pandemic Leeches found in the local dungeon. Solus was gathering this material when he was captured, only adding to the comic tragedy.

Elza left to return to questioning Seldio’s accomplices. Once she was out of the room, Dias turned to us again.

“I really can’t thank you enough. You took out an entire bag of trash for the Adventurers’ Guild!”

“What do you mean?”

“Their syndicate is the cancer of Granzell’s Adventurers’ Guild, and you took care of them all in one sitting! Oh, thank you so much!”

Cancer? Folks sure hated Seldio.

“Did you get a chance to Identify Seldio?”

Yeah.

“Did you get a look at his skill list? I believe he had Sexual Attraction and Sexual Enchantment.”

Now that you mention it... They hadn’t come into play when he was fighting us, and they had no effect on Fran when he talked to her.

“One of our female Guildmasters was seduced with those skills. That was how he convinced her to promote him to A-Rank. Apparently, women bent over backwards for him.”

And that was enough to make him A-Rank?

“It was one of the reasons,” said Dias. “And the guild listened to her suggestion they admit a man forty years her junior, just because he called her pretty.”

Jeez...that easy?

“There was pressure from House Aschtner itself, of course. And bribes. Lots of bribes. He took advantage of his privileges to lobby the Guildmasters, too.”

“Is the guild okay?”

That sounds distressing. The Adventurers’ Guild was sounding more and more like your run-of-the-mill crooked corporation.

“I can only apologize. Guildmasters are human too, and some of them happen to be trash.”

I guess... Even the politicians and policemen back on Earth committed crimes. More authority brought more temptation.

“I’ve been waiting for him to slip up so I could take his rank from him.”

But I thought he shook people down on a daily basis. Isn’t that cause enough?

“As much as I hate Seldio, what he did was completely legal. He did pay the people he extorted, and no adventurer had actually filed a complaint.”

What? Why? Do they just give up on their weapons and cry themselves to sleep?

The Aschtners must have quite a collection.

“Well, you’re strong. Very strong. Strong enough to beat anyone that threatens you. But an ordinary adventurer wouldn’t dare oppose an A-Rank, let alone the son of a powerful marquis. Especially not after all the nasty rumors.”

I supposed losing your weapon was a lot more appealing than losing your life.

“What made Seldio even more dangerous was the fact that he went crazy. There is manatech that can target criminals, but the criminal needs to feel guilty for it to work.”

That item wouldn’t work against Seldio. To the bitter end, he’d been convinced he was doing the right thing.

I can’t believe that the marquis would drug his own son.

“That’s the thing with nobles, I’m afraid. Having an A-Rank adventurer as your puppet can be very convenient. A-Ranks have the authority to mobilize adventurers—a privilege denied to nobility—and the marquis could easily use Seldio to give out orders. The military power he could’ve wielded is not to be underestimated.”

Okay, but why go through the trouble of drugging him?

“Because he didn’t think Seldio would keep following orders once he became an A-Rank. Drugging him was a safer and more practical option.”

Man, these nobles didn’t play around! We should keep away from them!

“Seldio was also a bastard in the technical sense. Marquis Aschtner treated him like another disposable pawn. He probably saw it as a convenient way to clean out his family’s closet.”

Unfortunate, but I understood Dias' point.

"I do think the Aschtners are about to get into a lot of trouble."

"Why's that?" Fran asked.

"Because they were looking for Godswords. Those weapons are powerful enough to take on an entire army. If word got out that the marquis was looking for them, he might be suspected of treason. His only defense would be if he said Seldio were looking for it of his own accord."

"Really?"

"Any self-respecting veteran would want to get their hands on a Godsword. Call it the adventurer's dream. It would be perfectly excusable if Seldio was looking for one."

It was almost pedantic, but I saw the difference. There was nothing suspicious about an adventurer searching for a legendary weapon, as long as the marquis didn't have anything to do with it. If Marquis Aschtner told him to look for one, it would be a different story.

"And what have we here..." said Dias as he casually filed through the papers Elza had left. He singled out a piece of parchment. "...is evidence the marquis was the one looking for them."

"What's that?"

"A list of the latest information about them, courtesy of Marquis Aschtner."

Whoa, seriously? I wanted to see! I asked Fran to move to a better peeking location. The names of the Godswords were on it, all right. It even described their appearances and special powers. The list was slightly different from the one Lumina showed us, and I wondered which version was newer. A few weren't on it at all: the First Godsword Alpha, Mad Sword Berserk, Land Sword Gaia, and Demon King Sword Diablos.

"Hmm..."

"What is it, Fran?"

Fran asked why the five swords weren't listed, and Dias told her it was because they had already been found. Alpha and Berserk were in the northern

continent of Brodin, split between the two great kingdoms of the north. Since each of the quarreling kingdoms had obtained a Godsword, there had been relative peace over the last two hundred years. They knew that going to war would lead to mutually assured destruction.

There was an incident where two Godsword-wielders descended on the battlefield about three hundred years ago. There was a mountain of casualties, to no one's surprise, and the forest that had once stood there was now a desert.

Wow. What kind of powers do they have?

"Alpha's is quite well known. It gives its user the Demigod skill."

"What does it do?" Fran asked.

"Basically, it grants the user superhuman strength."

"That's it?"

I'm sure it's powerful, but... Sounded kind of simple, too.

"Well, it increases your stats, enhances your physical capabilities, levels up your skills, stuff like that."

Hmm. Sounds boring.

"Doesn't sound strong," said Fran. Certainly not strong enough to be called a superweapon.

"I suppose you're right. You can say it's the most straightforward out of all the Godswords. But it multiplies your stats by ten. Your vision is magnified, giving you the ability to see through any concealment. Your hearing can eavesdrop on any part of the country. To top it all off, all your skills get maxed out. How does that sound?"

Very...strong. Ten times the stats, the physical prowess of a god, and the ability to express the user's full potential. No wonder it was a Godsword.

"Legend states that it can slay a hundred men with one swing, break through castle walls with two, and split a mountain in half with three."

Sounds like a myth, but if we're talking Godswords, I wouldn't be surprised.

“Even more terrifying is Alpha’s effective duration. Its user can maintain that superhuman state for more than half a day.”

Half a day was enough for a monster of that scale to ruin an entire country. At the very least, it could polish off a capital or two.

“Berserk has similar properties. Increased stats, enhanced physical prowess, increased skills. The only difference is that it’s more powerful.”

More powerful than Alpha?

“In terms of raw strength, yes. But Berserk always sends its users into an insane frenzy, slaughtering friend and foe alike. When the effects wear off, its user dies.”

Jeez, that sounds rough. But can’t you just have an army escort Berserk’s user into battle? The Godsword was as powerful as it was inhumane, but you could treat its user like a suicide bomber.

“Ha ha. If only things were so simple. What happens after Berserk annihilates the enemy?”

Take the Godsword away, I guess.

“And how do you plan to get close enough?”

Let them go crazy and grab the sword when they’re done. Surely there was no danger in taking the Godsword away from a corpse.

“All right. But the enemy probably has the same idea, and there is no guarantee that you could recover it before them.”

I see. If they messed up, the enemy might get to the Godsword first.

“Not only that, but Berserk also lasts for over half a day. There are records of the user destroying the enemy’s capital, then turning on his own cities. The memory is still fresh, even though it happened a long time ago. You have to be ready to die alongside your enemy if you want to use Berserk.”

A continent locked in a stalemate of Godswords. Best to keep our distance. Now I understood why the five swords—Alpha, Berserk, Diablos, Gaia, and Ignis—weren’t on Aschtner’s list. No one would be eager to part with their Godsword, no matter how much money you gave them. Taking them away by

force would be downright impossible.

So that's why they're looking for the missing ones.

"All the nations of the world are looking for them. I'm not sure how they got a hold of this information..."

The list contained more detail than Lumina's: War Carriage Sword Chariot Said to have the shape of a baton. Produces golems of all shapes and sizes, along with the power to control them. Golems are made of metal, capable of flight, and can fire beams of light. According to stories from the Gallerian war, Chariot summoned a thousand golems the size of human heads and destroyed a hundred ships with a coordinated volley. Last known location: Continent of Capur.

Sword of Wisdom Cherubim Known to be destroyed, but its fragments may prove valuable. Properties unknown. According to our research, the sword is decorated with the motif of a four-winged angel. Fragments are most likely located somewhere in the kingdom of Granzell.

Searching Godsword Explorer Has the shape of a monocle. Said to be able to understand all information across the land. Further details about its power are unknown. Last known location: Continent of Capur.

Gaolgate Sword Hel Details unknown. Said to have been used five hundred years ago in the continent of Chrome. Location where it was last used is now desolate and unfit for life. Said to have the power to control poison.

Cruel Dragon Sword Lindworm Has the shape of a sword. Further details unknown.

Lunar Sword Moonlight Said to grant its user the power to reflect myriad attacks.

Not much was known about the swords other than Chariot. And they didn't know where any of them actually were.

"Very interesting," said Dias. "If they're collecting broken Godsword pieces, they might be in the early stages of research."

What can they do with that research?

“Who knows? They probably think it’s worth it. Still, keeping this kind of stuff a secret from the government is a major faux pas.”

House Aschtner might be suspected of treason, even if what they were doing wasn’t illegal.

“Excellent evidence,” said Dias. An evil grin flashed over his lips. Not something I wanted Fran to imitate.

Well, it looks like Dias has a long day ahead. We should get going, Fran.

“Sure.”

“Sorry to keep you so long. I’ll call if I find anything new.”

“Hm.”

We said our goodbyes and left. Almost right away, a group of suspicious individuals approached, as if they had been waiting for Fran. It was almost like an ambush. The four figures couldn’t look any more suspicious if they tried—their faces were covered by their gray, hooded robes. They looked like mages with the sticks they held in their hands. In fact, they looked like they just stepped out of a fairy tale.

“What?”

Fran put her guard up. The four mages split up and pointed their sticks at the sky. A man came through this four-staff salute. He wore a gold-hemmed purple robe, unlike his plainly dressed associates, and the point of his staff was decorated with a beautiful jewel. His hood was down, exposing an arrogant, although admittedly handsome face. The blue-haired man looked like he was up to no good. Not that I thought all good-looking men were bad people. Honest.

“We have been waiting for you, Lady Fran!”

“Hm? Who are you?”

“My name is Glackmar. The head of the Eiworth Mage Guild.”

Glackmar bowed gracefully, like he was in a play. Admittedly, it made for a nice picture. I’d never heard of a Mage Guild before. I guess it was founded for mages to do their thing.

“You have exhibited your amazing talents in combat.”

“Hm.”

“Most impressive, however, was your control over the many magicks! I, Glackmar, was moved to tears by the display!”

Our fights would certainly be of interest to mages, if only because of the sheer number of high-level spells. I must’ve made it look like Fran fired Kanna Kamuy without a single word. However, Glackmar’s thick praise couldn’t hide his intentions. All his acting did nothing to cover his hostility and malintent.

“Now then, Archmage Fran.”

“What? I’m not a mage.”

Archmage sounded more like a title than an actual Class. Although, Fran might’ve unlocked a lot more options since the last time she changed Classes—it had been a while. Glackmar ignored Fran’s retort and took a small box from his breast pocket. He opened it, and dropped to one knee while showing her its contents. Following his gesture, the four gray-robed mages pointed their sticks forward and surrounded us. Their formation looked like the beginnings of a strange ritual. I hadn’t sensed any mana so far, but I was ready with Telekinesis should one of them make any sudden moves. The box contained a medal emitting powerful mana. It looked ominous enough to be cursed.

“Please.”

“What’s this?”

“We, of the Eiworth Mage Guild, present you, Archmage Fran, with the Medallion of the First. Please, wear it.”

“The First?”

The First what? I didn’t know what he was talking about, but Glackmar shoved the box closer.

Teacher?

Don’t even touch it.

No signs of magic so far, but the hostility coming from Glackmar and his

associates was too apparent for this to be a friendly gesture.

“Take it. This medallion is only worthy of an Archmage such as you.”

“Hm. Don’t need it.”

“Wh-why?!”

“Looks fishy.”

“Please, take it! We mean you only the greatest respect!”

“You can keep that, too,” said Fran.

“But Lady Fran—”

“All right, enough of that.”

“Wh-what?!”

A figure interrupted Glackmar and his cronies as we mulled over whether to cut them down.

“Still up to your dirty tricks over at Eiworth, I see.”

“Phelms?” said Fran.

“Hello. How long has it been? A day?”

Phelms, the former A-Rank wire warrior we’d faced in fierce combat, now stood in front of Fran as if protecting her. He put himself between her and Glackmar, his gentle smile emitting a subtle pressure.

“Begone, fool adventurer!” said Glackmar. “You have nothing to do with this. We are in the middle of a very important ceremony!”

“What’s he on about?” Fran asked.

“Just one of their old tricks.”

Phelms explained that we were about to be enlisted in the Eiworth Mage Guild. The medal was enchanted with a spell to compel its user into a contract, consummated through the execution of a simple ritual.

“The magical contract is quite dangerous. Not as binding as a slave’s contract, but there’s not much difference in how they’ll treat you afterwards.”

“People fall for it?”

We knew right away that nothing good could come of the suspicious bunch. The other mages should be able to discern their ill intentions, too. The Eiworth mages weren’t so strong that they couldn’t be handled pretty easily.

“And here’s their nasty trick. They only use this method of recruitment on talented children. You fall right in their age range, Fran. They must’ve thought they could rope you in with a few pretty words.”

An ordinary child could be easily coerced into joining an association out of fear of offending them. If the ritual wasn’t enough, fear of the organization should do it. They tricked little children into joining them with a silken tongue and intimidation. Talk about poor taste.

“The Eiworth Mage Guild is the only mage guild that employs this desperate measure. They’re low on the food chain, you see. They must want your power.”

Fran stared at Glackmar, who launched into a cavalcade of excuses.

“L-Lady Fran! Who will you trust: an ignorant boor, or a mage recognizing a kindred spirit, about to induct you into the mysteries of magic?”

“Phelms, of course. You people gross me out.”

“What...?! You little...! If we didn’t need you, you’d be...!”

Wow, this guy was thin-skinned! His robes could take more damage than his ego!

Anyway, let’s hand them to the authorities.

“Hm.”

Just as we decided what to do...

“Get her!”

A woman’s voice cut through the argument. The four mages moved in concert.

“Hrm.”

They took out their daggers and came at Fran.

“Wh-what do you think you’re doing?!” Judging from his surprise, Glackmar didn’t order the attack. The one pulling the strings had probably stayed in place to cast a spell while the other three came at us with knives. It was a poorly-thought-out strategy, with even worse execution. The mages were only good for their magic, and their skill with the dagger would make an amateur feel embarrassed.

“Hmph! Tsch! Ha!”

“Urk!”

“Agh!”

“Gah!”

Even Fran felt annoyed that she had to fight such weak opponents. She settled for disarming them by knocking the knives out of their hands. Granted, they probably felt like their hands were just routed by a steel rod, but the men should be thankful they got to keep their limbs.

“Haa!”

“Kyaaa!”

She sent the final spellcaster flying with a straightforward boot to the gut.

“Urgh...damn it!”

The mage’s hood came back, revealing her face.

“Hm? She looks familiar.”

She’s one of Seldio’s friends.

The female mage from Seldio’s party. I thought she would’ve fled Ulmutt by now, but she still doggedly pursued Fran.

“You little brat...!”

I didn’t know whether she was on drugs, too, but her eyes looked crazy. Like she was being chased by someone. She lurched up, holding her stomach, and shuffled towards Fran.

“Your sword...give me your sword...!” she said, clearly losing her reason.

“You’re after my sword?” Fran asked.

“Yes! How could a little Black Cat girl be so strong? By wielding that sword, that’s how! Once I have it, I can get out of here... My master will forgive me...if only I have that sword!”

Fran didn’t respond. As angry as she was, she couldn’t help but feel pity.

“Now...give that sword to me!”

Poor thing didn’t realize that yelling wasn’t going to help.

Wait, hang on. Fran?

Hm? What’s up?

Hand me over to her.

What?

I wanted to test something. Having heard my explanation, Fran agreed.

“This sword is cursed. Anyone unworthy will be killed upon equipping it. Are you sure you still want it?”

“Aha ha ha! What foolish lies! You should’ve come up with a better story if you were going to lie. If you don’t want to give me your sword, just say so!”

Fran had no reason to lie to someone she could finish off with her bare hands. Unfortunately, the woman’s madness meant she didn’t realize that. Fran handed me over, almost with a look of pity.

“All right. It’s yours.”

“You should’ve done that from the start! Come on! Give it here!”

Fran tossed me to the woman, sheath and all. She greedily picked me up.

“Heh heh heh heh. Now I can be strong too...”

I felt her try to take me, and something stirred inside of me. Something I hadn’t felt in a while.

“Aah...whaaaah...”

Immediately, the woman started groaning. Her eyes widened with fear, but I could only guess at what she saw.

“Hyaaaaaa...”

Her entire body convulsed as her groans turned to screaming. Her screams of agony bore notes of shock and pain, dreadful enough to traumatize anyone who heard them.

“Aaaaaaah—!”

With me still in hand, she let out a terrifying wail that sent shivers down the spines of passersby. They were granted a scene of terrible horror. They must’ve heard Fran’s warning, and assumed the curse was expressing its true nature. Civilian and adventurer alike looked upon the woman with pale faces. How many seconds had gone by?

“I-I’m sorry! Forgive—eeyyaah!”

Those were the woman’s last words before blood exploded out of her eyes, ears, and mouth. She keeled over on the street.

Thud.

“...”

The ensuing silence was deafening.

“Hm. Not worthy.”

Fran walked over to the woman’s corpse, cleaned my hilt, and picked me up. The consequent murmuring was so loud the crowd might as well have been shouting. I couldn’t blame them. A woman had just died a horrifying death in front of them. The gods were ruthless in dealing out their punishment. A thunderbolt for the ignorant and death for those who knew the nature of my curse. What did the gods show her in the last moments of her life? What did they do? I was plagued with a nasty aftertaste, although I hadn’t directly caused her death.

Which reminds me... Where are the other mages?

I’d totally forgotten about them. I looked around and saw that Phelms had apprehended them. The men looked shameful as he tied them up with his threads.

“Well, what shall we do with them?”

“What do you think?”

“I suggest handing them over to the Adventurers’ Guild.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. They are still an organization. The guild will not hold anything back to support a strong adventurer like yourself.”

I guess we should, if Phelms said so. I was going to drag the mages to their own guild and show them what would happen to them if they crossed us, but that would take too much time.

“Shall I take them to the guild for you?”

“Sure. Thanks.”

“Very well. If you’ll excuse me.”

Phelms took the hired mages away, with Glackmar complaining all the while.

“Oh, wait a second.” Fran stopped Phelms before he could get very far.

“Was there anything else?” he asked.

“Hm. They just need one more lesson.”

The pathetic mages were finally taken away after Fran administered a punch to the solar plexus to each of them. We felt a little bad for asking for Dias’ and Elza’s help again, but upon hearing the story, they were ecstatic.

“Now we can finally get rid of those scummy mages for good! I’ll show them what happens when you pick a fight with the Adventurers’ Guild!”

Dias jumped with joy as one of his subordinates took the rogue mages away. Fran bowed her head to Phelms.

“Thanks, Phelms.”

“Not a problem. I had a similar experience in the past.”

“A mage guild tried to trick you into joining them?”

“No, just the unpleasant things that fame can bring.”

Phelms had won the fighting tournament when he was younger, and he was just as popular as Fran was now. Mage and mercenary guilds came to recruit

him, not to mention the nobility and mafia. He had more than his fair share of coercions, and some organizations even compelled him to join through physical force.

“I couldn’t just stand there and do nothing.”

“How’d you deal with it?”

“I ran, for the most part. I wandered through the country so I wouldn’t be roped into any commitments.”

That might be the best way of handling it. Tracking Phelms down would’ve been difficult.

“But Dias was the one who saved me in the end.”

“Dias?”

“Yes. We were about the same age, and we got along well. He was already a Guildmaster, so he took me on as one of his advisors. It prevented other organizations from recruiting me.”

Even a clueless noble wouldn’t dare poach a Guildmaster’s confidante. At the very least, Phelms no longer had to dodge invitations by himself.

“You are definitely going to attract more unwanted attention, and some of these people might prove dangerous. You can demolish any criminal organization that messes with you, but doing so to a noble will only cause unrest.” Phelms pursed his lips.

“Speaking from experience?” Fran asked.

“Ha ha ha. You guessed it. An aristocrat from another kingdom pursued me once, and they were quite persistent about it.”

“Just because you refused to pledge allegiance to them?”

That sounded like an overreaction.

“Well, they were very arrogant and ill-mannered. Really, there were only fifty of them, including the lord of the house...”

“Did you kill them?” Fran asked, her eyes alert with expectation.

“Oh, no. I just sent them to the hospital.”

“Aww.”

“The only problem was that they still had blood ties to the royal family.”

“Only”?! I was amazed at how casual he was. The related kingdom had to be angry, if only to save face.

“So how’d you take care of it?”

“I just captured everyone they sent after me until I got an audience with their king. Granted, it was done under cover of night.”

Phelms threatened him, basically. Which sounded reckless, no matter how strong he was.

“I could only do that because his nation was very small and weak. Even his strongest subject was weaker than me. If I had offended a kingdom the size and strength of Granzell, I would have had no other option but to run.”

How small that kingdom must’ve been.

“Fran, do not hesitate to ask for help if you’re ever in trouble. You can ask the guild or Amanda herself. You’re friends with her, right?”

“Hm. But why Amanda?”

“You don’t know? Most of the orphans she took in and raised have come into their own as adventurers. I believe a genuine plea for help from Amanda could rouse a powerful enough fighting force to crush a small country.”

Amanda was a lot more connected than we thought!

“Amanda’s great.”

“Indeed she is, even without her personal abilities. They say the reason Raydoss leaves Granzell alone is because they do not wish to incur Amanda’s wrath.”

Amanda had been running the orphanage for decades. I didn’t know how she raised her orphans, but I could easily imagine most of them wanting to be adventurers. With her training, their mastery of the basics should be perfect. Most of them probably grew up to be established adventurers in their own right.

“Although I think you’ll be fine with the Beastman Nation watching your back.”

“The Beastman Nation?”

“Are you not under their employment?”

“No.”

“Forgive me. I thought you worked for them, since you watched the tournament together the other day... I see. The Beast King has taken an interest in you, then.”

“You think so?”

“Yes. The other nations will think twice about making a move on you after that. Judging by the response of my beastman acquaintances, you are quite popular among them. He must want to appeal to his people by getting along with you. At the very least, he is trying to align you with his kingdom.”

Asking a favor of Fran would inevitably lead her to reciprocating, which might end with her joining the Beastman Nation. Rigdith certainly put a lot of thought into gaining Fran’s favor. Not that I thought he himself was behind this. The idea was more likely to have come from Royce and Rosch. Our relationship with the beastman royals had been strictly transactional ever since the tournament, and we would take advantage of them where it seemed appropriate.

“Ah, sorry for keeping you so long. That’s enough chat from this old man. I must be going now.”

“Thanks again.”

“Come to my shop whenever you’re in Bulbola. I’m researching a new recipe that incorporates curry into my dishes.”

“Looking forward to it.”

“I hope you’ll like it,” Phelms said, bowing graciously before making his exit.

He was so cool and manly; so reliable. What a gentleman! Dias could learn a thing or two from him!

“You really have a knack for getting in trouble, Fran,” Dias said, as if reading

my mind. “The way you stand out really makes you a magnet for it, so hang in there. However, the guild thanks you on this occasion.”

It's not like we're going out of our way to look for it.

“Ha ha ha, you're right. But I must warn you. This is not the last time something like this will happen.”

“What should I do, then?”

“Well, like I said, you need to go to the Beastman Nation. May I suggest you make your journey sooner rather than later? You'll at least be out of reach of the fools of this kingdom.”

We'd love to, but how are we supposed to get to another continent?

A ship sounded like our best option, but we probably needed entry permits.

“The guild has already authorized your immigration details. Your guild card will act as identification, since you have taken on a personal quest.”

Didn't know the guild cards had such a convenient feature.

“There will be a manatech-assisted inspection at the borders, just show them your card and they'll let you through.”

“Thanks.”

Now we just need to find a ship.

“Hmm, that will be difficult. Bulbola's your best bet, but there aren't any ferries that will get you there.”

How do folks get to the Beastman Nation, then?

“Normally, adventurers hire themselves out as bodyguards for merchant ships.”

Yeah, I figured.

Fran wasn't well-suited for that job. In fact, she was at a disadvantage. Anyone might be excused for underestimating her based on her looks. Given the decision between a kid adventurer and a burly-looking old man, even I'd pick the latter. We only got to Bulbola because we knew Fult and Satya, and we only got there as part of Salut's plot. How were we supposed to get on a

merchant ship without any connections? ...Wait, we *did* have connections.

We'll ask the Lucille Trade Association.

"Aah, I see."

We got acquainted with them after the Seedrun insurrection. They were bound to have some merchant ships chartered for the continent of Chrome.

"Getting hired as a bodyguard shouldn't be a problem," said Dias. "Merchants have the fastest information network in the world. I'm willing to bet that your name has already been circulated throughout Bulbola."

"So I should be a bodyguard?"

"That's the one job that's always hiring. But really, you shouldn't have to bother. You have a more direct connection, don't you?"

"Hm?"

Ahh, yeah, I guess.

Fran was slow to realize, but I'd already put some thought into Dias' idea: the Beast King himself. The approach was valid, but problematic.

First, I didn't think we should keep asking the king for favors—we didn't want to owe him too much. We also didn't know when he would return to his kingdom. He was the king, after all, and therefore had international kingly duties to attend to. Even if his royal laziness compelled him to skip out on that, Royce was there to keep him in line. Finding our own boat might be faster than waiting on Rigdith, but Dias disagreed.

"Your first point is a foregone conclusion, isn't it? You already owe the Beast King by asking to meet Kiara."

You're not wrong.

"And I don't think you'll have to worry about him being delayed."

Why's that?

"Those people travel light and fast, even when they come here. Sure, they had to ride in a carriage for the purposes of ceremony, but they move a lot more like adventurers otherwise—fast and stealthy."

Then we could certainly travel a lot faster that way. In fact, Fran might have a hard time keeping up. But I thought of another problem: how to keep my identity a secret. These were beastmen with sharp instincts as well as top-ranked adventurers. They might find me out just by being near me.

“You’ll have to work on that one yourself,” said Dias.

True.

We didn’t know whether they would agree to take Fran, anyway. Asking for a ship was within reason, though, so we should probably start with that.

“We’ll ask the Beast King for help.”

Yeah. Only one way to find out.

“Tell His Majesty I said hello.”

“Hm.”

We left Dias and headed back to the Beast King’s accommodations. The sun was setting, but I wanted to get this conversation done. Although, knowing Rigdith’s impatience, I wouldn’t be surprised if he had already left. It was a little late for a meeting, and we couldn’t just sneak into the Beast King’s rooms, but our worries came to nothing. The front desk let us in as soon as Fran said her name. Rigdith still had her on the list.

“Hey, Fran. Back so soon? What’s up?”

The Beast King greeted us with a magnanimous wave of his royal hand. Although, coming from Rigdith, the gesture was far more casual than royal—like a sloppy middle-aged man. Despite it all, he managed to keep his regal aura.

“What do you need?”

“Hm. A boat to get to the Beastman Nation.”

“Oooh, about time! You should come along with us, then. Can’t think of a faster way!”

Well, that was easy. Even if he was travelling in secret, should the king really add outsiders to his party so readily? However, Royce immediately objected.

“Have you forgotten that you have business in the Granzellian capital, Lord

Rig? We must meet the king and his family before we leave.”

“Ugh. Do I have to?”

“Of course you do.”

The king had his royal chores to attend to. We had plans to go to the capital, but there was still time before the auctions started. Visiting now was out of the question, unless His Majesty employed Fran as a bodyguard.

“Okay, but how are we gonna get the little lady back home?”

“We don’t need to accompany her, you know. She’s strong enough to beat Godo. I’m sure she can take care of herself,” Royce said, praising Fran. After all, her victory against Gaudartha was a matter of historical fact.

“Point taken.”

“I do believe,” said Royce, “she was looking for a boat to get there.”

“Oh. Were you?”

“I understand your excitement,” said Royce, “since she is close to the princess in age, but please be reasonable.”

“Princess?” Fran asked.

“Yeah. I have a fifteen-year-old daughter back home. I can’t help seeing a bit of her in you!”

No wonder the king was so nice. She was almost exactly the same age as his daughter.

“I think we should help her. Master will be pleased.”

“Right?”

“She will be useful,” Royce said. “I admit.”

We’re right here, Royce! Although, he probably said it knowing Fran would hear. He was asking her indirectly if she was ready to be used as a political tool. As one of the Beast King’s advisors, Royce couldn’t leave an evolved Black Cat alone. There was bound to be a reaction from the other beastmen. As someone tasked with running the country, Royce had to take Fran into account. Even so, he managed to tell her about the consequences of her visit, and that she should

refrain from going if she wasn't ready. The dashing bunny wasn't just a handsome intellectual; he was considerate, too! I could imagine his suitors already!

"I'll leave if I get sick of it," said Fran.

"Ha ha ha!" Royce laughed. "I think I'm the only one who can catch this little lady if she decides to book it!"

"Very well," said the Beast King. "We will not ask you to become one of our vassals. Let's make this simply transactional. A show of goodwill between Fran and the Beast King should be more than enough for our people."

That sounded reasonable. Fran didn't need to lie either, since she genuinely liked the Beast King. They just needed to get along in public.

"Well then, this is for you," said Royce.

"What's this?"

He handed her a small golden plaque. It was carved with an intricate crest, making it difficult to counterfeit.

"Identification with Lord Rig's name on it, and my own. With it, any vessel of the Beastman Nation will be glad to take you onboard. Our merchant ships should be making port at Bulbola at the moment. You can hitch a ride."

"Really?"

"Yes. Just look for the flags that bear the same insignia."

Things were going perfectly so far. Did Royce see through Fran, and devise this to make her owe them a favor? That was okay, I suppose.

In any case, we could leave for the Beastman Nation. Royce went on to say that there were plenty of merchant ships making the route—one ship every three days. The vessels bearing the royal crest answered directly to the royal family, so they should welcome Fran as an esteemed guest. The plaque was a lot more powerful than I thought.

"The merchants of the Beastman Nation should have your name and description memorized by now. Even without our identification, you would be more than welcome."

All we needed was a ride, really. There was one other matter we wanted to discuss.

“Where is the Godsmith?” Fran asked.

“Hmm,” said Rigdith. “You’ll know when you get there.”

“I will inform our officials to give you the introduction letter. Not that the Godsmith will see you, even if you have it.”

“Just promise you’ll be our middleman if you happen to get along with that character,” said the Beast King.

The mythical Godsmith was rebellious enough to refuse the requests of a king?

“Hm. Sure.”

“Good luck. You’ll need it.”

“Master is currently staying at the royal palace,” said Royce. “The capital should be your first stop.”

Night had fallen by the time we finished our discussion. It had been a busy day, despite the end of the tournament. At least we could head for the Beastman Nation now. Was there anything else we had to do before we departed?

Right, we have to go see Garrus.

His friend said he should be back in time for the tournament, so maybe he was in Ulmutt already. Then again, he said he’d tell us...

Let’s go to the blacksmith and see.

“Hm!”

Maybe he didn’t want to bother us during the tournament. The sun had only just set, so I didn’t think Zeld would be asleep yet. We should probably get the blacksmith a little present, too.

There was a bar on the way to his shop, and I thought about getting the dwarf the strongest drink there. The bartender already knew about Fran, and readily agreed to sell her a bottle of the stuff. He even gave us a discount in exchange

for a handshake. Alcohol in hand, we visited Zeld's shop.

"Little lady! Congratulations on the medal!"

"Hm. Thanks."

Zeld had been watching the tournament. He gladly accepted our gift, raving to Fran about its quality. She asked him about Garrus, but it turned out the old dwarf hadn't returned. "The rest of the folks who went to Bulbola with him are here, though."

"Garrus is still in Bulbola?"

"Apparently. There are some jobs that only he could do."

"I see."

"He said he'd be back before the tournament, so I wonder why he didn't tell anyone about his change of plans. Weird..."

We should look for him in Bulbola before we went to the Beastman Nation. Who knew when we would see him again? Fran excused herself, but Zeld stopped her before she could leave.

"S-so about that sword..."

Zeld was looking at me now with the same interest he had shown in Fran's Black Cat Set. I couldn't blame him. I was frequently the subject of the commentator's ramblings, after all. As an experienced blacksmith, Zeld knew an enchanted sword when he saw one.

"Uh, do you mind if I take a look?"

Teacher?

Just a little bit. But tell him not to equip me. It's very dangerous.

"Okay, sure."

"Thanks," said Zeld.

"But you'll die if you equip it, so be careful."

"What?"

"It's cursed. Anyone other than me will die if they equip it."

Zeld stopped reaching for me, his curiosity overwhelmed by fear. No one in their right mind would want to equip a killing sword. You wouldn't want to touch a poison apple, even if it only killed you if you ate it. He knew I was more than an average enchanted sword.

"C-can I touch it?"

"Touching's fine."

"R-right..."

He wasn't about to back out. He made up his mind and gripped my hilt. Once he had his hand on me, his training as a blacksmith took over. He inspected my blade and guard.

"Hmm. I do feel powerful mana coming from it. Symmetrical blade, and this alloy...could it be..." Zeld muttered. "Do you mind if I ask you where this sword came from?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know, who made it, which region are they from, stuff like that."

Always the point of interest with blacksmiths. Too bad I didn't know the answer. Should we just tell him that I woke up in the Demon Wolf's Garden? Then again, I wasn't sure if it was safe to do that.

"I don't know."

That was the safest answer.

"I see...I think this thing's made of orichalcos..."

"Orichalcos? You're sure?"

"No, I'm not. I've never seen this metal before. Hang on a sec," Zeld said, rummaging through his shelves in the corner of his smithy. He eventually found the worn book he was looking for. "These are blacksmith orders from the previous tournaments."

The great influx of merchants during the tournaments made finding the list easy.

"Not just any ordinary blacksmith. This guy was apparently an apprentice of

the apprentice of a Godsmith. Now, in the list of materials the Godsmith used, there is something called orichalcos. I don't know what it is, but I know it's top-notch material that can withstand a Godsmith's hammer."

A legendary metal. Unfortunately, I didn't think I was made of orichalcos. I kept breaking, almost at regular intervals. I did come with the new-and-improved self-repair feature, but I couldn't imagine a legendary metal being so soft.

"But then," said Zelda. "Orichalcos isn't the only metal I've never seen before. Still, I feel there's something strange about this sword. It's top-shelf manatech, at the very least."

Top-shelf manatech...! Thanks, Zelda! I mean, that was pretty good, right? I wasn't a Godsword, but maybe a Godsmith cranked me out in his spare time?

No, probably not.

"Hm?"

"Nothing."

We somehow talked Zelda out of his burning curiosity and returned to the inn. Fran still needed to eat and take a bath, but there was one last thing we needed to try.

All right, here I go.

"Hm."

I used Create Clone to make several copies of myself. Usually, I made copies of my human self, but...

Yep, they're swords.

"So many Teachers."

Create Clone was now making copies of my sword self. Why? I tried the skill again, focusing on an image of my human self this time, and it worked. We had more options in battle now that I could reproduce both my sword and human forms.

However, my human form had changed slightly. There was something off

about its physical proportions. It was still me, but it looked more like my hypothetical brother than myself. Was this the cost of being able to make sword copies? I didn't mind—I had already decided to live out the rest of my life as a sword. And this form was definitely stronger!

How did I start making sword copies, though?

"Hm..."

Oh, I guess it was bedtime for Fran.

Whoops, sorry. Let's wrap up for today.

"Hm..."

I think we've finished all our business in Ulmutt. We've said our goodbyes and prepared as much as we can.

"Hm. We can go to the Beastman Nation now..."

I wonder what kind of place it is.

"Zzz..."

Ha ha. Good night, Fran. You did good.

It was the morning of our departure, and we were in the dungeon to say our goodbyes to Lumina.

"You're finally leaving, then. I must say I can't wait to see what happens."

"Hm..."

"Come now," she said. "You shouldn't look like that on the day of your departure. The surface is sunny today, is it not?"

While this wouldn't be our final goodbye, it still made me misty-eyed. Lumina was special to Fran.

"I must thank you again for telling me where Kiara is," said the Dungeon Master.

"Thanks for helping me evolve, too."

Yeah. If anything, we owe you for expending your powers like that.

"Then I suppose we can call it even."

Lumina laughed, but it didn't help to lighten Fran's mood.

"This will not be our final farewell. In fact, I would be less worried if you went off with a smile."

"Hm..."

"Oh, what am I to do with you?"

Lumina got up and pulled her into an embrace. It was a warm and gentle hug, to which Fran responded by burying her face in Lumina's shoulder and squeezing her arms. She didn't know when we would see her again. Lumina patted her back and Fran finally pulled away. Her face was red with embarrassment.

"Sorry," Fran said.

"Ha ha ha. You can still be adorable, I see. Come visit me if you ever feel lonely. I'll hug you all you want."

"Hm."

There was no more doubt in Fran's eyes. Comforting her was supposed to be my role, but even I couldn't replace the maternal love Lumina had for her. I felt a mixture of frustration and admiration.

"I'll be going now," Fran said.

"Be safe."

Lumina smiled as we left the dungeon. Before Fran teleported away, she whispered in a low voice: "Bye-bye."

A farewell she didn't mean for anyone to hear.

We'll come back.

"Hm."

Let's show her how much you've grown by then.

"Hm!"

An hour went by, and a mass of people had gathered at the city gate.

"Oh, Frannie! You'll come again, won't you? You're always welcome!"

Elza came up first. She put her arms around her, crying her eyes out. *Watch the snot now, Fran!* The big adventurer almost suffocated her with her pecs, but Fran didn't seem to mind. In fact, she was patting her on the back to comfort her.

"Sniff...thank you, Frannie."

"Hm."

"Here. A farewell gift just for you. Take it." Elza handed her a basket. Inside it were ten bottles of liquid.

"Potions?"

"These are my specially formulated skincare lotions. Use them before going to bed and you'll wake up with fresh and supple skin. You're really strong and cool, but that doesn't mean that you can skip out on being cute and girly."

I couldn't have put it better myself, Elza. Fran was made of excellent stuff, but I, her crude guardian, didn't have a clue about fashion and makeup. We'd put her gift to good use starting tonight.

"I'm supposed to put it on my skin?"

"Yes, take a little bit into your hands and massage it into your skin."

"Why?"

"You don't have to understand. You'll know when you grow up and fall in love."

"Uh. Sure?" Fran nodded, still befuddled.

Okay, but hold up a moment, Elza. Fall in love? Fran? She was still twelve! It was too soon for her to fall in love! What if she became more beautiful because of that lotion? Hyenas would come circling! What if Fran fell for one of the better-looking ones? I supposed I could cut him down if he turned out to be nothing but a good-looking scumbag. But what if he was actually bright and cheerful? What would I do? What if he was reliable enough for Fran?

No. Looks and personality wouldn't be enough to protect her. He would have to be strong enough to defeat Fran and me together. He needed to be financially strong enough to take care of her, and faithful enough to be with her

all his life. If he couldn't fulfill all of Fran's selfish desires, I would not allow it!

"F-Frannie? Your sword's rattling on your back...is it okay? That thing's cursed, right?"

Teacher?

Oh no. I'd almost lost control there. I was about to Telekinesis myself out of my sheath.

It's nothing. Just thank Elza for her present.

Well, no need to think about it so much now. Courtship was still in the distant future and might never come to pass. I was thankful for the lotions, though. Making Fran cuter was always a good thing.

"Hm. It's fine. Thanks."

"Come back if you ever run out. I'll cook up a fresh batch."

Now it was Dias and Aurel's turn.

"What an excellent day for an adventure."

"All the best to you, young lady."

They bowed their heads, asking Fran to send Kiara their regards. I expected a letter, but they hadn't prepared one.

"We remember it like it was yesterday, but we can't say the same for her. She's probably forgotten about us," they said in a matter-of-fact tone, but not without sadness.

That was why they skipped on writing a letter. To Kiara, Dias and Aurel were probably acquaintances she met while she was young. They didn't know whether she would remember.

"Just mention us in passing. Tell her these old adventurers in Ulmutt said they knew her and got nostalgic for the past."

"More importantly, tell us how she's doing."

"Hm. Got it."

Amanda came to hug Fran next. Forlund, Phelms, and Colbert stood behind

her.

“Frannie, I can’t believe we have to say goodbye again! It’s too soon!”

She was crying, too. Amanda’s beautiful face was ruined with tears and snot just like Elza’s, but thanks to Elza’s Aesthetics skill, she was...hm. Let’s stop that train of thought here. Elza was a special case.

“Farewell.”

Forlund wasn’t a man of words. I always thought he was a little like Fran. That said, I didn’t think he’d come to send her off.

“Come on, boss, you can do better than that,” Colbert sighed jokingly.

“Don’t mind him, Fran. Forlund’s always like this. He doesn’t mean anything bad by it.”

“It’s fine.”

“Ha ha ha. Yeah, you two are alike, after all. The boss likes strong adventurers. This is his way of acknowledging you.”

“Yes,” Forlund said.

“Hm.”

“Until next time.”

“Sure.”

“Oh gods, there’s two of them now...” Colbert whispered with mock horror.

A conversation between Fran and Forlund would be scarier than a ghost story. But they connected well enough, for some odd reason.

“Will you head to Bulbola, Fran?”

“Hm.”

When she agreed, Phelms gave her a ticket with “Dragonhead” written on it. “For you. A meal ticket. Do come visit us.”

“Thanks.”

That was nice of him. Fran had found the Dragonhead to be particularly delicious the last time we were in town.

“I’m gonna go back to training,” Fran told Amanda. “I won’t lose next time.”

“Good.” Amanda finally let go of her. “I’m going to the Beast Nation, too,” she said.

I think she’d said something similar when we parted ways in Alessa. But going to a different continent was not in the cards for her.

“No.”

“You may not.”

“Not happening.”

The other adventurers present immediately shot her down. Amanda begged and pleaded with them, but she was already needed in Alessa. Forlund and the rest had to drag her away.

“See you again soon, Frannie!” Amanda was Amanda, even to the end.

Now it was the Beastmen’s turn.

“Make friends with my daughter if you happen to run into her, won’t you?” said Rigdith. “She’s a bit of a tomboy, but she’s a good girl, really.”

We didn’t mind...but she had to be one hell of a tomboy if Rigdith was describing her that way. Royce, Gaudartha, and Rosch took turns to say their goodbyes. Finally, the Blue Cat Zehmet stuck his hand out.

“I caused you a lot of trouble.”

“Hm.”

“I will serve the Beast King and train under him. I’ll fight your evolved form the next time we meet.”

Zehmet still had a way to go, but Rigdith might just be able to bring his potential to reality.

“Both me and the Blue Cats have a lot of learning to do. I’ll work with the Beast King to change things,” Zehmet said with a look of slight reservation.

He still remembered his dead friends. They were bad people, but his sensitivities prevented him from forgetting them.

“I’m counting on it,” she said.

“We’ll make it happen.”

Zehmet was an influential Blue Cat. If he could get his tribe to fall in line, we would certainly see fewer slavers. Fran gripped his hand and shook it.

“I’ll be going now,” she said.

“We’ll meet again.”

“Hm.” She let go of his hand and hopped onto Jet. “Jet.”

“Woof!”

She waved goodbye to everyone. “See you.”

“Bye, Frannie!”

“I’ll see you soon, Fran!”

Elza and Amanda shouted as Jet kicked off into the distance. With the blessings of everyone present, we departed from Ulmutt.

Epilogue

I FEEL LIKE I SAY THIS every time we leave somewhere, but Ulmutt's a good town.

"Hm."

"Woof."

We met Lumina, which led to Fran evolving. Our whole trip here was a miracle, really. If one of the cogs were out of place by even a millimeter, none of it would've happened.

Fran finally knew members of her own tribe after meeting Lumina and Inina. It was a tribal bond, different from the relationship she shared with her parents. She fulfilled her mission of raising peoples' opinions of Black Cats throughout the world. Old Lumina even pampered her a little, showing me a cute side of Fran I never thought possible.

The tournament taught us a lot. Hit and run, compatibility, distractions. Stat superiority wasn't the only way to win a fight. The tournament even taught us our strengths. Most of all, we understood that there were still people much stronger than us. We couldn't beat Forlund or Amanda if they decided to go all-out. Winning was impossible. But that only meant that we had to get stronger.

"We'll be back next year."

Yeah, we'll win for sure by then.

"Hm."

And then there was the Beast King and his crew. Despite the animosity between Black and Blue Cats, there was a strand of hope, although it mostly depended on the Blue Cats' cooperation. Even so, there was at least the beginning of a dialogue. The Beast King and Zehmet would do their part, but that didn't mean we could slack off.

Next stop, the Beastman Nation. It's gonna be a whole new continent.

"What do you think it's going to be like?" Fran asked.

Beats me. I've never been there.

We could probably look for information, but going in blind was exciting.

Black Cat Kiara...

Kiara was the Beast King's master and an old friend of Dias, Aurel, and Lumina. Rumor had it that when she was younger, she was a lot like Fran, right down to her personality and her love for battle. As much as I loved Fran, I couldn't help but worry about meeting an older version of her.

I wonder what she's like.

"I can't wait to see her," said Fran.

I hope you like each other. Seriously.

"Hm!"

What hellos and farewells awaited us next? I only hoped that our next stop would help Fran grow and bring her joy.

Afterword **H**ELLO, EVERYONE. This is Yuu Tanaka, kemomimist. This probably isn't our first time meeting in this column, but if it turns out that some of you are reading the sixth volume first, well...I hope you'll read the first five volumes before you finish. It's a lot more fun that way, I promise.

The time has come again for the afterword...something I'm exceptionally bad at writing. I don't really have anything else to say, so I end up writing some pointless thing. I tried to convince The Powers That Be that not having an afterword would save them money, but it was not to be.

Now I have to drag this out for three pages...

What should I write?!

Okay, that should've knocked off a couple lines, at least. Thanks for entertaining my bad joke.

This really is difficult. You know how some writers have fun in their afterword? They converse along with the characters and fill up the afterword that way.

Maybe I should try that meta style, writing with Teacher and Fran, but I'm not too sure about it. Won't it ruin the setting of the story? I don't think it'll satisfy the readers either, so I can't help but worry. I have a lot of respect for writers who can write an entertaining afterword. You're great, all of you. For me, writing one takes ten times longer than writing a short story. I'm serious. These few pages have taken an entire day.

Well, I might as well give it a try.

"In an effort to wasting a few more pages, the author will now have an exclusive interview with the one and only Fran! Yaaay!"

"Hm."

"This is our first time meeting face-to-face, and I must say you're really cute!"

"..."

“Uhh...Fran?”

“I’m getting a nasty aura from you... stay back. Don’t talk to me.”

“N-nasty aura...?”

“You feel like Teacher when he’s eating crystals.”

“No, I’m not acting anywhere near as trippy as that. Wait! Did I just get found out as a kemomimist...? Seeing cat ears is getting me excited...”

“Shut up. Get back.”

“Come on, there’s no need to put your guard up. See? I’m perfectly harmless!”

“Hmph.”

“Gyaaa!”

Sorry you had to read that. I won’t do it again, even if I am running out of material.

And finally, acknowledgments.

Thank you to my editor, I-san, for all the advice during the writing process.

Thanks to Llo for providing wonderful illustrations, as usual. The Beast King looks so cool.

Thank you to Maruyama for providing the cute extra comic at the end of the novel. The way you took my dumb suggestions and turned them into interesting situations is amazing.

Special thanks to my dad for reading his son’s work despite not reading contemporary fiction, and my friends and acquaintances for hanging out with me when I got sick of it all.

Finally, thanks to everyone involved in the publishing process and of course you, dear reader.

Thanks for reading all the way to the end. See you in Volume Seven.

READ ME <<<<<<
RIGHT-TO-LEFT

EXTRA CHAPTER

Fran's True Calling

STORY Yuu Tanaka

ILLUSTRATION Tomowo Maruyama

HMM.
MAYBE...

SHE
WOULD
USE HER
NATURAL
BATTLE
PROWESS
TO BE AN
ASSASSIN.

KILL!
殺す
木

BUSTLE

IF
FRAN
WASN'T
AN
ADVEN-
TURER...

WHAT
WOULD
SHE BE
LIKE? HOW
WOULD
SHE HAVE
LIVED HER
LIFE?

HUSTLE

SOME-
TIMES I
WONDER.

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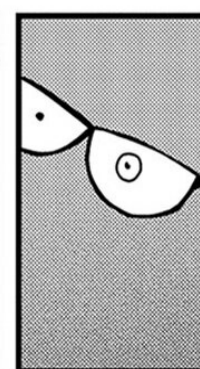
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SCRUMPTIOUS...







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